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## Hanging back with the brutes: barbarism in Tennessee Williams' The Red Devil Battery Sign

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HANGING BACK WITH THE BRUTES:  
BARBARISM IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' THE RED DEVIL BATTERY SIGN

BY

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THESIS

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## INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams' The Red Devil Battery Sign, written, performed and revised during the period 1973-1979, presents a harsh indictment of American society and returns to a major Williams' theme in the final decade of his life: the conflict between the spiritual and the material nature of human existence. Foster Hirsch, in A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams, identifies this conflict as one of the "consuming themes" which dominates Williams' life and art: "the conflict between the puritan and cavalier ... the body and the soul--these great dualities provide the conflicts in both the plays and the life of Tennessee Williams" (7).

Williams treatment of the conflict between matter and spirit is the focus of this study of The Red Devil Battery Sign. His affinities with the anti-industrial stance of the Southern Agrarians and the American romantic tradition is examined in the first chapter. Williams pursues the theme of anti-industrialism in his 1965 novella The Knightly Quest, a vituperative satire of Lyndon Johnson's America which provides the source for his symbol of American big business and the emerging military-industrial complex, the Red Devil Battery Company. The body/soul conflict is presented here as the final combat between the warlike aggression of a power elite

and the spiritual aspirations of romantic rebels in a mad world bent on self-destruction. This satire epitomizes Williams' view of technological warfare as the ultimate insanity of mankind's irrational and self-destructive urge to conquer nature and all that is fertile in the human spirit. The atmosphere of intrigue and menace in The Knightly Quest prefigures the paranoia and sense of social evil dramatized in the later play. Williams' strong sense of American decline in the Vietnam era dominates both works. Both comment on the brutality and dehumanization attendant upon the American dream of progress which has led toward mass conformity and the destruction of spiritual and moral values.

Williams voiced his disgust with American aggression and moral failure in a Playboy interview conducted in the spring of 1973, the year he completed the first Red Devil script:

This horrid war has eroded the whole fabric of American life, incontestably. The destruction in America of the ideal of beauty is one of the most apparent and depressing things of all and devolves on the man who's ruling tis country. I think that when you prosecute an immoral war for so many years--a war that is disgraceful in that it pits such a powerful nation against such a pitifully underpriveleged people--then morality is destroyed for the whole country. (Jennings 248)

Williams' peculiar combination of the destruction of the "ideal of beauty" with the immorality of war characterizes the Red Devil Company transformed in The Knightly Quest to The Project, a government-sponsored and supported research

operation aimed at developing the ultimate weapon of destruction. The Project represents a hostility toward the natural world and the romantic rebellion of those who oppose its destruction and the loss of their humanity. Williams' vision of American decline is examined within the context of the Southern experience of industrialization and social crisis elaborated by John Crowe Ransom and W.J. Cash. Also examined is the manner in which the myth of the South as a fallen world becomes emblematic of Williams' vision of the conflict between matter and spirit.

In the second chapter, the body/soul dilemma is pursued in thematic links found between the lead female roles in A Streetcar Named Desire and The Red Devil Battery Sign. Both plays share a vision of humanity conquered by brutality. The two heroines share similar traits and circumstances characteristic of the belle figure in southern literature: failure to adjust to social realities, victimization by brutal men, and a strong duality between their sexual nature and moral character imposed by a repressive social code. Both characters seek a belief in their own humanity and escape from a brutalized existence which reinforces the psychic split between their human and bestial natures. Blanche DuBois is destroyed by the dehumanizing and brutal forces surrounding her. Woman Downtown in Red Devil is brutalized by the Battery empire, but not destroyed by it. The different endings Williams provides for these related heroines reveals a radical

change in Williams' treatment of the theme of a triumphant barbarism in American life.

The third chapter presents another aspect of the body/soul conflict as it appears in the mythic structure of The Red Devil Battery Sign. The romantic rebellion against the dehumanizing influence of the Battery empire is examined in terms of Williams' Orphic vision. Williams use of the Orpheus myth in Red Devil is examined in relation to his use of myth in Orpheus Descending in order to find a logical approach to the apocalyptic ending of Red Devil which confused and outraged critics and audiences. The problem ending of this play is scrutinized for details which connect the ending to the idea of recurrent defeat and renewal contained in the cyclical nature of the Orphic myth. Northrop Frye's quest myth and Beate Hein Bennett's valuable discussion of infernalism are employed to evaluate Williams' modernized versions of the Orphic tale.

The concluding chapter scrutinizes Williams' bleak vision of American decline in Red Devil for signs of regeneration. A discussion of the redemptive power of love for the play's lead characters answers critics' charges of cynicism and apocalypticism in Williams' late works while the darkness of his vision in a late play such as Red Devil Battery Sign is seen to be mitigated by a transcendent affirmation of survival and endurance in the face of death.

## THE KNIGHTLY QUEST

The Red Devil Battery Corporation makes its first appearance in Williams' work in the 1966 novella entitled The Knightly Quest. Gore Vidal, in his introduction to Tennessee Williams' Collected Stories, praises Williams' portrait of the "craziness of the society which had so wounded him" (xxii) in "one of his best stories" (xxv). Vidal admires the novella's satirical attack upon American leadership and its sharp awareness of the "real problems ... in the sixties, the Vietnam War and Watergate and Operation Armageddon then--and now--underway" (xxii). Vidal's suggestion that the events of 1960s America forced a new understanding in Williams' art enlarges our view of the artist whose gradual transformation of style in this period is often explained in personal terms, such as the death of Frank Merlo, Williams' longtime companion, and consequent addiction to alcohol and drugs. Vidal recognizes the strength of The Knightly Quest is its razor-edged satire of American power madness and laments "what a novel he might have made of this story! instead of that flawed play, The Red Devil Battery Sign" (xxiii).

Unlike many plays William developed from his short fiction, Red Devil appears to owe little to its original



source on a superficial level. No single character, dialogue or setting survives from story to play. Yet The Knightly Quest may be considered a significant source in terms of its ideology. Both novella and play express Williams' dark vision of the modern industrial state in which the American dream of limitless national expansion becomes a nightmare of diseased power madness. In both works Williams depicts an American military-industrial complex, known alternatively as The Project and the Red Devil Battery empire, bent on world supremacy. The hostility and aggression of this war machine toward other races and nations is ultimately directed at the natural world and the individual in a mechanistic society which aims at eliminating the enemies of conformity.

Williams' virulent opposition to the abuses of industrialized society and the misuse of modern technology in warfare is firmly grounded in a dominant strain of American literature analyzed by Leo Marx in The Pilot and The Passenger. Marx identifies the fatalistic response of American writers to the "transformation of life by the machine" (113) as a modern approach to the age-old "Promethean theme" which "renews man's sense of the perils attendant upon the conquest of nature" (114). Marx comments that the Machine Age emphasis upon the conquest of nature, productivity and progress dominated America's idea of national destiny since the nineteenth century and forced upon modern consciousness a

"violent break with the past" with a "suddenness and finality" that sent shock waves through the entire culture (116).

These shock waves were felt far into the twentieth century and persist today. The anti-industrial stance of American writers took, according to Marx, the form of attacks upon the machine as a symbol of change which would destroy the beauty of life and man's harmony with the natural world. Marx describes this destruction in terms of an invasion by the machine of rural America, its "virgin land" conquered by rapid growth and expansion made possible by technology (118).

These fears of invasion of America's stable rural life expressed a conflict between "civilization and nature" (Marx 118) with great significance for the postbellum South in which Tennessee Williams grew to maturity. The anti-industrial views of Agrarians such as John Crowe Ransom and W. J. Cash's perspective on the industrialization of the South afford insight into Williams' antagonism toward the modern industrial state whose evolution he witnessed from the Depression into the Reagan era.

Williams' novella satirizes Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, its moral pretension, religious and racial bigotry and naked aggression cloaked beneath a messianic mission to "save" the world. The Knightly Quest portrays the final combat between good and evil in the race toward Armageddon. Williams draws the battle lines between two opposing forces:



Gewinner Pearce, a romantic idealist and his brother Braden, a power-mad incarnation of evil bent on destruction.

The two brothers represent Williams' perception of a division in American society, the Manichean split between body and soul, the clash of materialistic and spiritual values:

America, and particularly the Southern states, is the embodiment of an originally romantic gesture. It was discovered and established by the eternal Don Quixote in the human flux. Then, of course, the businessman took over and Don Quixote was an exile at home. (KQ 444)

Williams finds American business inimical to the "romantic heart, which is the true heart of man" (445). This notion has very strong Southern roots, exposed by W.J. Cash in The Mind of the South. Cash describes the "decay of the aristocratic ideal" among Southerners submitting to the "lure of commerce and industry" in the Progressive Era between 1880 and 1914, a period in which whoever built a factory or started a business was hailed as a public benefactor and Southern patriot (Cash, 199, 237). Cash regrets the necessity of achieving the South's goal of progress through reliance upon the region's commonest trait of "backcountry heritage: horse trading instinct" (198, 225) over the pioneer idealism of the Virginia aristocrats. Cash reserves his most vituperative rhetoric for this backcountry ruthlessness and unscrupulous conduct which succeeded in identifying itself with the high moral purpose and noble enterprise of the Old South by allying business with religion. Southern captains of finance lacked integrity in private but became stern moralists in public.

Religion became just another business opportunity as church leaders were infected with the businessman's ambition for empire-building (235).

Williams echoes Cash's critical stance by locating American power in the hands of bigots and bullies who cloak their mendacity in self-righteous religiosity. Williams portrays religion as the eager handmaiden to the destructive force of evil disguised as the bandwagon of progress. The Catholic and Protestant ministers in the Pearce's hometown are each paid to preach harmony in their respective pulpits and support the status quo. Williams satirizes the marriage of convenience between religion and commerce, which he terms "the glorious warm wave of the new religiousness" (KQ 421), when he characterizes the new Methodist Church with its swimming pools and bowling alleys as resembling "a glorified economics classroom" (421). Braden Pearce expects to establish churches for the "world population of friendly Caucasians" intolerant of individual rights and dissenters. The secular and the sacred are merged into a unified prisonhouse society whose "business" as a "Christian community dedicated to a great Good New Thing" is to "make sure everybody had just enough rope to keep from being too conscious of confinement" (421).

Williams does not neglect American business's other strange bedfellow, American politics. The knight of the story, Gewinner Pearce, whose Christian name recalls Sir Gawain of medieval romance, returns home after living abroad

since age sixteen to his estranged family and the Southern town which is his namesake. Gewinner's hometown is booming with prosperity due to his brother Braden's conversion of the family business, The Red Devil Battery Plant established by their deceased father, into a military-industrial operation euphemistically called The Project.

The Project has the backing and support of the White House and Congress as frequent mention of Braden's buddy, the President of the United States, affirms. References to their "top-level consultations on the crisis in Ghu-Ghok-Shu" and Braden's disgust with General Olds, "a goddam pacifist fool that favors us reaching some understanding in Wah Sing Mink and Krek Cow Walla" (404,450) not only avow America's involvement in overseas conflicts but indicate Braden as a powerful player in the American war machine. Gewinner soon learns Braden is holding the trump card in the "big game of sides against each other in the world" (410).

The Project is engaged in the development of a "marvelously mysterious weapon of annihilation" (402). Braden brags to his wife, Violet, who is engaged in counterespionage to destroy him and his weapon, that he will eventually rule the world by virtue of ownership and production of the means to destroy it (430). Braden is proud of his "progressive ideas," believing he and his "crackerjack" President think "realistic about the many grave problems confronting this country all over the world today and worse tomorrow" (449).

Braden's and America's perceived threat is the world's other races, the "reds and the blacks and the yellows" threatening American hegemony.

But Braden's military-industrial complex does not neglect the enemy within the gates. Braden informs his brother that everybody, including Gewinner, is "observed and classified" by a "security counsel" as "good, doubtful or bad security risks" and "new legislation is being pushed through at high speed for the isolation of all you don't-fit-inners ... there is too much at stake on a world-wide scale for the toleration of temperamental flare-ups and artistic hoopla" (418).

The artistic hoopla to which Braden objects is his brother's antipathy and sense of superiority to Billy Spangler, Braden's boyhood buddy, and owner of the Laughing Boy Drive-in. The Drive-in, located near the Project and directly facing the Pearce family mansion, is felt as a "personal affront" by Gewinner, a crass sign of the vulgarity and false cheer invading the former pastoral surroundings of the community. The Laughing Boy Drive-in sports Billy's "portrait in golden neon" laughing "out loud with a big haw-haw at ten second intervals" all day and night.

The neon sign's "mechanical haw-haw" is another instance of mechanistic dehumanization at work in Gewinner's hometown and, by extension, American society. The neon sign becomes a sinister symbol as it inspires "nervous screaming fits" in the carhops at the drive-in who are rushed away in ambulances when

their nerves shatter. The laughing neon sign is emblematic of genuine hysteria overtaking the townspeople of Gewinner.

Gewinner learns that "anxiety is the occupational disease" of the Project's employees. The town is constantly under surveillance by intelligence agents and their informers. Nervous breakdowns are endemic; victims are hustled off to a place called Camp Tranquillity and never heard from again "after the first hysterically gay postcard saying, This place is heaven!" (431)

The "ever-menacing idea of the spy" haunts the community whose members are not expected to protest, but to wear a "radiation-proof outfit and a happy smile" while civil liberties are suppressed, evening curfews imposed and federal agents replace the police force and patrol the streets in armored cars (432). At first sight of The Project, surrounded by electric fences and steel-helmeted guards, Gewinner is struck by its resemblance to "an enormous penitentiary for criminals of the most dangerous nature" (401). By the end of the novella, The Project's combination of power madness and political repression have transformed all of society into a penitentiary where one can either work for the Project or expect a never-ending visit to Camp Tranquillity.

Williams' comic vision of this American Gulag is a development of ideas felt and expressed by Southern Agrarians, such as John Crowe Ransom, in the thirties when Williams first began writing his social action dramas at the University of

Missouri. Ransom's essay from the collection I'll Take My Stand entitled "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" argues for an "anti-industrial" principle to defend provincial and rural America against "industrial slavery" (27,23). Ransom is concerned primarily with historical sectional differences between the American North and South. His model of the South's historic identity is a provincial, self-sufficient, modestly prosperous community adapted to its natural environment, affording leisure and security and intellectual freedom. He contrasts this stable society with the "urbanized, anti-provincial, progressive and mobile American Life that is in a condition of eternal flux" (5). Ransom's quarrel with industrialization is that it is the enemy of nature and the life of the spirit (21). His definition of "industrialism" as a "program under which men sacrifice comfort, leisure, and the enjoyment of life to win Pyrrhic victories from nature at points of no strategic importance" is a deadly indictment of industrialism's "malignant meaning" (15).

Ransom does not neglect the ties between American business and politics. Washington sanctions the threat posed to rural and traditional existence by encroaching "industrial progress" by enticing farmers to become "more cooperative, mechanical, mobile--in short, more industrialized" (19). Ransom cites the faults of the "unregenerate South" which lacked sufficient "pioneering" energy to "repair" the damage

of invasion and defeat, and deplores the South's "living shabbily on insufficient patrimony," bringing about a spiritual and physical decline which left it vulnerable to the temptations of the proponents of the New South, the "carbetbaggers" ready to jump on the bandwagon of a soulless progressivism (16-17).

In Williams' novella, Gewinner Pearce is firmly grounded in the anti-industrialist camp. He recognizes little in his hometown now transformed by The Project. A "sylvan park" has become "a concrete playground full of monkeys disguised as children," a park Gewinner recalls as a "romantic ballet setting" where "swans drifted about on a lake and there were cranes, herons, flamingos and even a peacock with several peahens around him, but now there's not a willow and not a swan or a lake for a swan to drift in" (400). The fumes from the project are blamed for not only a bad smell in town but the destruction of plants and vegetation. The Pearce's flower garden is sacrificed to progress and even the ministers agree that "Easter doesn't seem the same without lilies" (449).

Clearly, The Project represents not only a threat to the enemy outside the gates, but is a genuine danger to the natural environment evidenced by the disappearance of the pastoral images of Gewinner's past. Williams employs the pastoral tradition in his satire not as a wistful remembrance of lost beauty but, in Leo Marx's terms, as an "indictment of the destructive, power-oriented uses to which we put



scientific and technological knowledge" (155). Gewinner's disappearance is threatened as the "don't-fit-inners" are expected to go the way of the swan lake in Braden's "society-in-progress" (418). Although self-interest motivated Gewinner's return home, his mission of blackmailing his mother into reinstating his curtailed travel allowance is transformed by the threat to survival of the non-conformist and dissenter in Braden's power.

Gewinner identifies with the "plumed knights in armor" (410) routed on the field of Agincourt by "mercenary foot soldiers ... equipped with a new weapon called the long bow" (409). Williams suggests that this new weaponry introduced mechanical destructiveness into warfare, an early precursor to brutal weapons of mass destruction manufactured in our time. For Gewinner, this transformation of combat into mass murder was "a little bit like suddenly switching from a game of chess to a game of checkers" (410). Skill in chess requires responsible choice in capturing the king and sparing as many remaining game pieces as possible. Checkers represents a mindless mapping of conquest which ends only when one or both of the opponents is wiped out.

The mechanistic long bow which destroys the knights has culminated in the weapon manufactured by The Project. Braden informs his wife "it will soon be possible to possess and control the whole planet by pressing a button connected with a wire" (430). In Williams' view, the wire represents the



mechanistic, dehumanized goal of industrial progress: the entire world of nature and humanity threatened by a man-made "button connected with a wire" (430). Gewinner's decision to join his sister-in-law's guerilla action against the Project represents the stubborn endurance of romantic idealism, the spirit Williams invokes in the assertion that "Quixote de la Mancha has never been broken." Williams claims that perhaps only birds understand that "lunatic thing," romantic rebellion: "Have you ever seen the skeleton of a bird? If you have, you will know how completely they are still flying ..." (444-445). Once resolved upon a fight for survival, Gewinner feels "a vibration in himself like a countervibration to the one that came from The Project." These "duelling vibrations" form an "equal conflict, it gave him the sort of strength that a barefooted Hopi, treading bare ground in a dance, is said to draw up out of the blazing dark core of the earth" (419).

This image of primal fire at the center of the earth lends Gewinner the unlikely status of natural man allied with the natural world engaged in a primal combat with machine age man armed with weapons of a destructive power inimical to the forces of nature.

Williams' vision of the violaton of natural order by the mechanistic, dehumanizing force of industrial progress bears a striking resemblance to John Crowe Ransom's thesis in "Reconstructed by Unregenerate." Ransom views the historical process of pioneering as aimed at a finite result, the

establishment of a stable and essentially conservative civilization in which man has concluded "a truce with nature" permitting the arts of living to flourish. But Americans, according to Ransom, have perverted the pioneer spirit into a "gospel of Progress" which "enslaves them to toil and turnover" in an infinite process of development with no ultimate goal, which indeed is without end, a "formula which may involve its practitioners in self-torture and suicide just as readily as in the enjoyment of life" (7).

This is exactly the situation of the townspeople of Gewinner whose hysterical nervous crises and paranoia are symptoms of the self-torture inflicted on adherents of what Ransom terms the "gospel of Service" (8). This gospel instills the spirit of "competition for material advantages" which keeps the community in continual "fume and ferment" with every "constituent part" in "perpetual physical motion" (10). These two gospels represent an irrational obsession with the conquest of nature which Ransom finds is the American curse, "the strange idea that the human destiny is not to secure an honorable peace with nature, but to wage an unrelenting war on nature" (7).

Ransom claims America's "materialistic dreams" based on "the illusion of preeminent personal success over a material opposition" merely masquerade "belligerence" beneath a euphemistic doctrine of ambition (9). Ransom's term belligerence is equivalent to the aggression which motivates

Braden Pearce in The Knightly Quest. Braden's Project represents diseased ambition: the achievement of power at the highest level of American society with the aim of world domination or destruction.

Braden's achievement in The Project is the fictional embodiment of Ransom's notion of the irrational American dream of limitless material progress:

Our vast industrial machine, with its laboratory centers of experimentation, and its far-flung organs of mass production, is like a Prussianized state which is organized strictly for war and can never consent to peace (8).

While Braden and his Project represent the belligerent aspect of America's materialistic ambitions, Braden's boyhood buddy, Billy Spangler, represents a typical adherent to the gospel of Service:

Billy thought of himself as being a part of The Project, still a humble part of it, but one that was on the right rack to arrive someday, through humility and obedience and Spartan control of himself, at a position of far greater eminence and much closer to The Center than he now was. (424)

Billy's goal is to "arrive at a position of far greater eminence" merely because "Billy had ambitions" (423), not because he has particular goals or accomplishments in mind. His main objective is to serve The Project and when he mistakenly believes his opportunity has come he has a "very proud and elated feeling. He felt that something big and wonderful was about to happen, and that he, in his own humble and ignorant way, was a partisan in it, chosen to be one" (447). Billy is "chosen" by Gewinner and Violet to deliver

their bomb in a container of his Laughing Boy Drive-in coffee to headquarters at The Project, ironically making the disciple of the Gospel of Service the agent of destruction of the Progress he worships.

The "big boom at The Project" is "a far-reaching event." A coy sentence describes the effect of the bomb in the coffee container as follows: "it went off, and everything went off with it ..." (KQ454). The idea of total apocalypse is not incidental to the story; rather, it is the ultimate power play in the struggle for domination. Braden confesses to his friend, Billy, early in the story that "what we're dreaming of at The Project, man, is a white Christmas, and that white-hot snow is gonna fall out of heaven and be as hot as all hell" (413). While Braden expects to be the "one who would press the button" of annihilation, Gewinner and Violet speculate what would happen if "somebody else had cut the little wire?" (430).

Williams does not "save" the world from destruction in the novella, however. Rather than cutting the wire as the reader might expect, Gewinner and Violet take the unaccountable action of not merely destroying The Project, but the entire planet along with it. They escape the destruction in a spaceship called the Ark of Space, a "reassuring touch of romanticism" (454), navigated by pilots from another galaxy where romantic impulses, or the knightly quest, will find acceptance.

Though Williams stages the initial conflict of the story as a battle between good and evil, his representative romantic, Gewinner Pearce, is ultimately more concerned with flight or escape from evil rather than combat. Gewinner's nightly quest to "feel something back of the stars and something deep under my feet" is perhaps merely "the pleasure of getting a little away from the fake medieval castle and the Laughing-Boy Drive-in" (410). Getting away from it all is Gewinner's initial motive for returning home: "All I'm here for is to blackmail Mother and Braden into giving me back my travel expenses. What has good and evil got to do with that?" (419). But of the choice between good and evil, Gewinner realizes "coldly, abstractly, which of the two was which, and also knew which of the two it would suit him better to serve in whatever way it was possible for him to serve it" (418).

So Gewinner, like Billy Spangler, dedicates himself to the service of an idea, displaying a cold, abstract adherence to principle. Williams' apocalyptic ending indicates not merely mankind's defeat in its malignant war against nature and spirit, but the survival of the "lambent spirit" of Don Quixote whose "castles are immaterial" (444). Gewinner flees the material world in his "knightly quest, a thing of the highest significance in every part of creation, wherever a man in the prison of his body can remember his spirit" (446). He and Violet flee into "weightless ozone" (454) where time no longer exists.

Gewinner's flight from time and worldly existence is typical of Williams' romantic sensibility. As Paul Zimmerman noted in his review of the novella, Williams is concerned with the survival of the individual in the "war against personality" (93) not with the survival of human society. Gewinner's distaste for contemporary American life begins as an aesthetic response and is transformed into moral resistance to the status quo. But the apocalyptic ending which Gewinner escapes does not represent a moral victory. Charles Brooks finds that in the ending of "this particular fantasy, as in Camino Real, the romantic is finally triumphant, though one is not supposed to feel too hopeful that it can be that way in actual life. The triumph is achieved by flight from the world" (735). Gewinner's flight from the world is portrayed as the triumph of the romantic spirit exulting in the freedom to continue its quest for beauty and peace.

Peace and beauty are pastoral elements exiled, like the romantic impulse toward these values, not merely from the fictional world of *The Project*, but from the material culture of the South as viewed by the Agrarians and Southern writers in the first half of the twentieth century. Richard Gray in Writing the South describes the manner in which social and economic change in the New South broke up "inherited codes" of the Old South, causing an "inner division" in Southern writers between the idyllic myth of the garden, the pastoral ideal of Southern social organization, and the invasion of

industrial organization which denied "all bonds and connections other than the economic" (154,158).

Leo Marx argues that the pastoral impulse "to retreat in the direction of nature" is not mere escapism, but is a "serious criticism ... of the established social order" which questions "a society dominated by a mechanistic system of value, keyed to perfecting the routine means of existence, yet oblivious to its meaning and purpose" (152). The urge toward "withdrawal from the world of established institutions" takes the form of "movement in space" (151). The unspoiled environment to which the protagonists flee in The Knightly Quest is truly America's last frontier, outer space.

Williams' novella dramatizes the regional experience of the South's invasion and destruction by the alien force of industrialization as an internal conflict and his artistic solution, flight, becomes inevitable when the romantic spirit is faced with the uncompromising evil of The Project. For Williams, industrial progress is clearly on the side of hate and division, destroying mankind's sense of community the way the Project destroys human relationships in Gewinner's hometown. The urge toward flight from this dilemma is common to many characters in American literature who, according to Peggy Prenshaw,

yearn for freedom from the past, from suffocating family responsibilities, old mistakes and corruptions, illusions, compromises, mendacity. Americans all, they harbor to some degree the strong impulse to escape history, assert their

innocence and declare independence from entanglements that would thwart their individualism (6).

The flight at the end of Williams' novella corresponds precisely to this form of revolt. To escape the effects of time and change is to escape human history. It is also, of course, not literally possible to escape the effects of time and change in actual life unless one takes the route of madness or delusion, an artistic solution Williams chose for Blanche DuBois in Streetcar.

Despite the arch comedy of the explosive ending to The Knightly Quest, Williams' artistic solution to the problem of the individual personality threatened by the modern industrial state evades the issue of the social and historical context of man's freedom and individuality. Williams affirms a triumph of the romantic spirit won at the high cost of the end of human history. The idea that mankind's true communal spirit can only be liberated after the apocalypse reveals not only Williams' contempt for and loathing of the business and power mania infecting American life but his despair at man's feeble capitulation to the dehumanizing forces encroaching upon civilization. Despair is the dominant tone and response in Williams' late work after 1961 and The Knightly Quest contains this despairing tone despite the satirical humor.

Williams shares the fatalism of many American writers discussed by Leo Marx who lacked the public's optimism toward the "new industrial order" viewed as "antagonistic to the



integrity and concerns of the self" by writers who saw only its power to "defile and desecrate the natural environment" (196). Marx cites Thoreau, Twain, Fitzgerald and Faulkner as examples of authors concerned with what he terms "pastorals of failure" which "enact the old hope of recovering 'the natural' only in order to deny it" (197). Marx finds their works use the machine and technology as reductive metaphors for the "vast interlocking organizational structure" of government and corporate capitalism whose expansion invades every aspect of private life while increasing dependency in individuals enslaved to a meaningless abstraction (204). Marx analyzes the rhetoric of the pastoral tradition as an expression of "political feelings of discontent ... aroused by the socio-economic structure ... displaced upon a highly abstract, disembodied entity" (207) such as technology. The fatalism of American writers who take the view of technology as an unstoppable relentless force of evil leads, Marx argues, to the writing of pastorals of failure which offer little hope for a redemptive future (207). Thus the pastoral takes the form of a social determinism which is unrelievedly pessimistic.

The ideology expressed in Williams' novella is anti-business, anti-industrial and anti-military. It contains echoes of the social warning of Streetcar: "In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching, don't--don't hang back with the brutes" (Streetcar 72). The novella also echoes

the theme of Streetcar as Williams avowed it in a 1973 interview: "the apes shall inherit the earth" (Szeliski 66). The Knightly Quest projects an uneasy victory for the romantic spirit over the destructive force of mankind while The Red Devil Battery Sign dramatizes the eventual triumph of barbarism over civilization in terms of society and the individual, leaving no escape route for romantic sensitivity in a universe of divisive hatred and aggression. The prisonhouse society first depicted in The Knightly Quest becomes the claustrophobic, hellish landscape of Red Devil in which the prisoners' revolt promises not renewal, but regression to man's animal nature.

## SHE-WOLF AND LA DAME AUX CAMELIAS

The eternal conflict between matter and spirit, or body and soul, underlies Williams' early plays such as A Streetcar Named Desire and remains center stage thirty years later in The Red Devil Battery Sign. C.W.E. Bigsby's survey, Twentieth Century American Drama, notes the significance of the body/soul conflict within the context of American drama as exhibiting the determinism of social forces such as materialism combatting the individual's search for spiritual meaning in life:

For the force of history is associated with a physical and material drive; the transcendent vision which justifies that history with a spiritual impulse. The war between them seems unavoidable both within the individual sensibility and, externalised, in the public world beyond...[Williams'] protagonist-victims are not, finally, destroyed by capitalism, political corruption or a new brutalism, but by life's own internal tensions--that sacrifice of the spiritual to the material which is the motor force of history and, to Williams, as I suspect, to Miller, the root of the tragic. (13)

The body/soul dilemma is presented by Williams in social and metaphysical terms throughout his work which is strongly influenced by Southern tradition with its "uneasy balance of Puritanism and hedonism" (Porter 158). The Puritan obsessed with the spiritual aspirations of man constantly battles the

hedonist mired in animal passions and instincts in Williams' plays.

The puritannical and hedonistic aspects of Williams' obsession with the conflict between body and soul are a legacy of the influence of his Southern background and the Southern past. Thomas E. Porter examines Streetcar from the mythical perspective of the defeated South which makes of the "confinement of Blanche DuBois" a "legend about the passing of the Old South" (153). Porter's analysis of the Southern myth reveals its effect on Williams' imagination.

The aristocratic, chivalric romanticism of an agrarian society and the accompanying "patrician vices" afforded a privileged leisure class within a slave economy offset by a religious fundamentalism enforcing "strict moral standards (generally applicable to the women first)" (159) are the two dominant strains Porter finds in the Southern "code of honor and delicacy" (159) which survived the defeat of the Confederacy.

Porter's distinction of gender roles is quite important to the functioning of the myth. Porter finds the Southern "master is autocratic, prideful, gallant" while the "mistress is a paragon of domestic virtues" (157). Bertram Wyatt-Brown's Southern Honor analyzes sex roles and sexual mores of the Old South with its "notions of unequal sexual obligations and of deferences due the head of the household" (320), supporting Porter's claim that the master was permitted his

vices while the mistress had to remain irreproachable in conduct and stainless in reputation. Thus, the hedonism of the Southern male was socially sanctioned while a puritannical code was imposed upon Southern women. The brief courtship period of her girlhood permitted the belle only license to flirt and exercise physical charms to attract a suitable husband without any freedom for self-development necessary to a true maturation process (Brown 293-94).

Popular southern myth has given us the belle figure with her distinctly divided personality, characterized by Porter as the "fragile virgin of heightened sensibilities, modest, graceful, delicate" and the "vivacious adventuress who flirts and dares and teases" (161). These contradictory traits bred in the belle were reflected in the southern male's ambivalent attitudes towards women. Brown finds the double standard of male sexual license and a female code of conjugal purity created the Southern male's "split" between "the sexual and affectional impulses in his relations with women" (319).

Unable to "direct both their sexual drive and affections toward the same women" sex became "associated with an inferior ... expendable woman whom, outside of wedlock, he both enjoys and socially despises" (Brown 319). This double standard allotted two feminine roles in the southern code of womanhood: the lady and the whore.

Kathryn Seidel's The Southern Belle in the American Novel identifies the ideal woman and the fallen woman as opposite

poles of femininity masking male fears of female sexuality and power within a dominant patriarchal society. The southern code of feminine purity institutionalized the subordinate and dependent status of women and ensured both her chastity and devotion to domestic life. While men fulfilled the gallant role of protector or "shield" (8) from the dangers of encroaching urbane industrial life threatening the rural agricultural South, the young belle was expected to appeal to men by a projected image of beauty and vitality which after marriage would be extinguished in the self-sacrifice of wifely and motherly duties.

The demands upon the belle of such a sudden transition from selfish narcissism to selfless devotion were accompanied by sexual repression imposed by male fears of feminine sexuality. Fears of the animal nature of the female temptress personified harmlessly in the coquetry of the belle surfaced in the seductress figure of the fallen woman. Seidel cites severe sexual repression as a key to the corruption of the belle figure in southern literature as the "closeted life, part of southern tradition and designed to produce the pure, ideal woman, in fact results in a belle who becomes increasingly corrupt" (94).

The contradictory nature of the belle consisted of a flirtatiousness requiring her to be provocative without indelicacy in conjunction with a social modesty bordering on prudery. Since sexual intercourse was the precinct of the

male, women were supposed to exhibit no interest or pleasure in sexual relations with their husbands. The code of feminine purity required the belle to "deny her sexual feelings, yet present the facade of passion without feeling it" (Seidel 8). A sexually provocative female dangerously threatened male virility by virtually challenging her subordinate status. The male response to this threat in southern literature was often rape which stood for "ultimate domination and subordination" of women (Seidel 147).

The two roles offered southern women, lady and whore, both involve subordination and domination by the male. The southern ideal of womanhood distorted healthy instincts and desires of women in adherence to a restrictive code of behavior lacking "suitable outlets for natural sexual drives" (Seidel 161). This led to a host of neuroses assigned to the belle figure in southern literature such as narcissism, hypochondria, hysteria, mental depression and insanity. Both Blanche in Streetcar and Woman Downtown in Red Devil suffer from the sexual double standard of this inherited code and portray the fallen belle with her divided personality and traits of narcissism, hysteria and insanity.

Seidel finds the belle figure representative of the "flowering, rape and decay of the South" (164) in the evolution of her characterization in southern literature. Porter views her as emblematic of the fall of the South as an American parable of the fall of man with little hope for

redemption in the modern world. After the Civil War and Reconstruction period, southern manhood suffered exposure to fears and insecurities undreamed of in antebellum days. The franchise for blacks, Northern invasion of business and political life, dispossession of land and fortune. These took their toll on southern women whose burden became even more oppressive after this psychic injury to southern manhood. As a result, the belle figure became the focus of the failure of the Edenic dream of southern myth. Women whose feminine purity and honor were expected to redeem the impurity of southern manhood and operate as a corrective to the injustice and violence of the southern social order became instead a symbol of the myth's corruption and decadence.

The twin doctrines of suppression and exaltation of the ideal woman masking a genuine fear of female sexuality and power lingered after the breakdown of the code of sexual repression in the twentieth century. The image of the fallen belle emerged as "victimized still--not by external forces but by internal desires" as the "belle of the 20th century" became a "victim of her own sexuality" (Seidel 75).

The fallen belle forms the matrix of a new "demythologizing pattern" in twentieth century southern writing which "employs motifs of violence, disorder, insanity, sexuality ... all of which frequently culminate in the rape of the belle" with the rape representing the "violent disordering of a harmonious society" (Seidel 47). This view of the belle



as emblematic of the south's "flowering, rape and decay" is endorsed by Thomas Porter who writes that the "confinement of Blanche DuBois is a legend about the passing of the Old South" (153). But Blanche's legend is also about her unresolved inner conflict between body and spirit, a conflict reflecting the failure of a culture to integrate its pragmatic instinctual nature with its spiritual aspirations.

John T. von Szeleski argues that Williams plays express "an eloquent doubt about the outcome of the constant duel between bestiality and sensitivity in the human animal" (66). The phrase "human animal" precisely states the playwright's thematic concern with the essential duality of human nature. As Williams was strongly influenced by the combined puritanical and hedonistic tendencies of the Southern tradition, his attitude toward the duality of the human animal remained ambivalent throughout his career. While the beast was never really tamed neither was the spirit finally ever conquered.

In Streetcar and Red Devil this precarious imbalance between matter and spirit is dramatized as both an internal division between the carnal and spiritual natures of the plays' heroines and as a struggle against barbarism in their hostile environments. Both plays share a vision of humanity conquered by brutality and lack of compassion but the societal victimization of Blanche in Streetcar shifts in the later play to overt indictment of the spiritual failure of the community

to integrate the dispossessed and powerless figures who people Williams' imagination.

Blanche DuBois and Woman Downtown share basic traits of the archetypal figure of southern womanhood in her decadent phase, the fallen belle, just as the heroines' internalized conflicts between body and soul reflect cultural division between civilization and barbarism in Streetcar and Red Devil. Critical to the personal dilemma of each play's heroine is the resolution of this internalized conflict. John T. von Szeliski views Streetcar as an "allegorical demonstration" in which "animalism and sensuality are seen as throttling reason, compassion and morality" while "Williams' sensitive protagonists cannot make successful adjustments to this kind of life-problem without becoming animals themselves" (66).

The degree to which these heroines succumb to or transcend an incipient animalism is measured against a prevailing social order hostile to their aspirations. Both Blanche's hopes for marriage to Mitch and Woman Downtown's Congressional testimony are efforts at reconciliation with their better natures, but these efforts are defeated by the antagonism of Stanley Kowalski and the Battery empire. Thomas Porter points out Williams' typical plot "consistently presents the confrontation of a high-strung, sensitive woman and an alien environment" (155). The sense of an alien environment is strong for the heroines of both Streetcar and

Red Devil. Blanche appears lost at the opening of Streetcar when she believes she has mistaken her sister's address. A sense of her estrangement in the urban jungle of New Orleans' French Quarter grows throughout the play. Blanche's overdressed appearance, compulsions about cleanliness and hygiene and the comic contrast between Blanche's high-toned manners and the casual slovenliness of the Kowalskis and their "heterogenous type" (Streetcar 23) friends all mark Blanche as an outsider. Her status as uninvited guest deteriorates rapidly to unwanted guest as she fails to adapt to her situation.

Woman Downtown also exists in an alien environment. Like Blanche's need to "keep hold of [herself]" (Streetcar 28), Woman Downtown needs to "keep a clear head in this atmosphere of intrigue" at the Yellow Rose Hotel in Dallas where she is just as conspicuously out of place as Blanche is in the Kowalski's apartment. When Griffin, the hotel manager, informs her "there is something so apparent about you" (RD 3) as he worries about protecting her anonymity, he really is concerned that her visits to the hotel lounge excite unwanted attention from drunks in the bar who repeatedly mistake her for a prostitute. Woman Downtown is openly contemptuous of the Battery men who are also guests at the hotel just as Blanche takes a superior attitude toward the Kowalskis' neighbors and both characters desperately seek an avenue of escape from the alien environments in which they are caught.

This sense of displacement in Williams' heroines reflects the larger cultural displacement belonging to southern myth of a defeated dying culture in which Thomas Porter finds the "sense of alienation from proper place is joined to a preoccupation with time" (158). When "cut loose from a protective society" the southerner appears "crippled or doomed" by the passage of time and defeat of a lost tradition that formed the southern personality but set it at odds with the modern world (Porter 158-159). Joined with a sense of displacement, both heroines experience painful dislocations in time. Equally haunted and obsessed with a past which has disabled their ability to cope in the present, both Blanche and Woman Downtown slip repeatedly into past mental states, either through narrating to a listener past events in their lives or experiencing traumatic reminders embodied in stage effects. These include hallucinatory gunshots recalling the suicide of Blanche's husband or the savage grimace of the Red Devil Battery sign which Woman Downtown sees in the face of a cab driver, the hats of conventioners and in the sign blinking outside the windows of her hotel suite.

Judith J. Thompson characterizes this temporal and spatial dislocation as "mythicized memory" which occurs in two forms in Williams' plays: the demonic and idyllic. Williams' protagonists are trapped in a "single obsession: to recapture or escape from the one significant experience in his or her past" (2). Both Blanche and Woman Downtown are haunted by a

past traumas from which they long to escape, but they are trapped in stasis. Thompson finds this characteristic of the pattern of mythicized memory which freezes characters "in the act of looking backward in ecstasy or fear, their emotional growth arrested, and their psychological state thus rendered abnormal, neurotic, or otherwise disturbed" (4).

Blanche and Woman Downtown both suffer from severely disturbed psychological states resulting from a haunted past. Blanche's significant past event whose memory she tries to evade through alcoholism and indiscriminate sex is her one act of "deliberate cruelty" to her dead husband. She holds herself responsible for his death and refuses to forgive herself because "deliberate cruelty is not forgivable" (SND 126). Blanche's "mythologized memory" is demonic. All of her reported memories are horrific tales of violent death and decay. The lies with which Mitch reproaches her are to Blanche a necessary deception to disguise the personal disintegration which followed her exposure to the reality of death. Blanche's entire life has seemed to her one "long parade to the graveyard" (SND 26). She attempts to make Mitch understand her sexual promiscuity by revealing her unbearable intimacy with death: "Death--I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are ... We didn't dare even admit we had ever heard of it! ... The opposite is desire. So do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder!" (SND 120)

Woman Downtown longs to escape the dehumanizing effects of a tortuous youth and abusive marriage to the president of a conglomerate called the Battery empire. This empire, manned by "battery men," (41) represents the military-industrial complex targeted by Williams in The Knightly Quest. The Battery empire is the dehumanizing force whose brutality and strong arm tactics lead to what Woman Downtown describes as "genocide for profit" (57). Genocide is the deliberate and systematic execution of a race, in this case the human race. Her allusions to "Asian wars" planned long before their execution and conspiracy to overthrow democratic government by assassination associate the Battery empire with more than a murderous assault on humanity. Williams personifies the Battery empire as Death incarnate.

Woman Downtown was hostess to "Red Devil Battery monsters" at her husband's prison-like hacienda whose hollering guards, dog packs and guests comprised "one big hell-hollering death grin" (25). Her marriage was one of pretended ignorance of crime and violence, an enforced silence amongst knowing smiles protecting secrets. She was married to a corruption that left her "not just walking wounded but walking dead which made [her] adaptable to it!" (RD 53)

Thus both Blanche and Woman Downtown have lived on intimate terms with death. Looking backward is not an escape for either Blanche or Woman Downtown; instead, their obsessive return to past traumas reinforces their sense of alientation

and isolation in the present and in their longing for comfort and release they seek it in death's opposite, desire.

Blanche and Woman Downtown are practically case studies of the fallen belle as "victim of her own sexuality" and her "internal desires" (Seidel 75). Both heroines struggle with a dual image of lady and whore, the latter role rather too hastily attributed to them by a hypocritical morality. As Joseph Riddel says of Blanche, she is a

victim of civilization's attempt to reconcile [desire and decorum] in a morality. Her indulgent past is a mixture of sin and romance, reality and illusion, the excesses of the self and the restraints of society...her schizoid personality is a drama of man's irreconcilable split between animal reality and moral appearance. (Riddel 25)

Both Blanche and Woman Downtown exhibit the "schizoid personality" (Riddel 25) of the human/animal division inherent in Williams' omnipresent body/soul dilemma. According to Leonard Quirino, "Incarnation is what [Blanche] is ashamed of, and the flesh is what she has abused...for submitting to its importunate demands" (67). Quirino argues Blanche has been "conditioned to believe that the anarchy of the flesh must, whenever possible, be transcended in the interests of family and culture" (67), an issue clearly demonstrated in Seidel's discussion of the code of repression which characterizes sexual passion in women as evil and degrading. Seidel describes Blanche's "divided personality" as the conflict between her "sense of propriety" and "repressed sexual drives" brought to the surface when she "confronts a man outside the

code of southern chivalry, a man whose overt sexuality is simultaneously desirable and repulsive to her" (166).

The social conditioning of Williams' fallen belles is carefully revealed in both Streetcar and Red Devil. Both Blanche and Woman Downtown are raised in fear and ignorance about sex. Blanche's first "discovery" of love occurred at age sixteen. According to Stella, Blanche "didn't just love but worshipped [the boy-poet, Allan Grey] ...and adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human! But then she found out...this beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate" (SND 102). According to Blanche's account, love struck her with a "blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow" (95). Here is a confession of her own ignorance of the carnal nature of love. Following her elopement with Allan Grey, Blanche felt she had "failed" her husband "in some mysterious way":

He came to me for help. I didn't know that...I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself (SND 95).

Neither Blanche nor her husband could make healthy sexual adjustments at this critical point in their young lives. Blanche says she was "unlucky" and "deluded" by her first experience with love and the facts bear this out. But her delusion was a too ethereal exaltation of love. The worship of her young husband as a being "too fine to be human" (102) ensured a violent disgust when Blanche was faced with his sexual nature. Her discovery about love was its carnal



aspect; her husband's "degeneracy" disgusted her not merely because she viewed homosexuality as a perversion but also because her socially determined ignorance of carnality and lust left her completely unprepared to face its existence in a man whom she worshipped with an impractically exalted spiritual love.

Blanche's disgust is essentially the same when she's confronted with Stella's gross sensuality. Stella tries to explain Stanley's attraction for her when Blanche remarks she hasn't noticed the "stamp of genius" on "Stanley's forehead." Stella replies "it isn't on his forehead and it isn't genius ... it's a drive he has" (SND 50). Blanche proceeds to reproach her sister for submitting to mere "brutal desire"; a man like Stanley is all right to go out with "when the devil is in you. But live with? Have a child by?" (SND 70,71) Here the overriding interests of culture and family are invoked and sexual drive is demonized as the "devil in you" which must be exorcised.

Blanche's public condemnation of brutal desire is, of course, very different from her private indulgence of her desires. Yet her condemnation arises not from false prudery or hypocrisy but remains true to her psychic split between carnality and spirituality. C.N. Stavrou notes a resemblance between Blanche's aversion to the "brutal desire" (SND 70) of Stella's and Stanley's relationship to Hamlet's intolerance of the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius: "Blanche's indictment

of Stella's animal lust for Stanley is very similar to Hamlet's indictment of his mother's carnal passion for his uncle" (Stavrou 31). Attempting to reconcile her promiscuity with her inherited notions of southern womanhood, Blanche appears, from Stanley's limited viewpoint, to have adopted Hamlet's advice to his mother to at least "assume a virtue, if you have it not" (Ham. III.iv.160).

But Blanche's condemnation of Stella's animal lust for her husband is really a bitterly ironic expression of her own dilemma and a disguised admission of her own sense of sexual sin and guilt. Sadly, Blanche's encounters with "brutal desire" have only sharpened the division in her mind between the carnal and spiritual aspects of love. Her worship of the purity and beauty of the boy/poet Allan Grey was defiled by what she considers to be unnatural and bestial sex. Her witness of this act reinforced the lady/whore duality in her own mind inculcated by a long tradition of feminine sexual repression. Since her husband's suicide, Blanche's "many intimacies with strangers" were "all [she] seemed able to fill [her] empty heart with" (118). Her serious disillusionment liberated her sexual drive while reinforcing her sense of guilt for her husband's suicide and need for atonement. So Blanche begins her journey on the streetcar named desire which takes her "where [she's] not wanted and where [she's] ashamed to be" (70).

The development of Woman Downtown's sexuality derives from a similar puritannical code of repression though her girlhood offers a strange contrast of abuse and neglect compared to Blanche's relatively carefree girlhood in a protective circle family and friends. Woman Downtown was reared on a West Texas ranch, "isolated as madness" with wolf howls and barking ranch dogs for companions (RD 50). Like many belle figures her mother died at her birth but her father rejected his daughter as if she "had deliberately killed her [mother] by being born" (50). Her father, a powerful State Senator, kept an Apache mistresss on the ranch who mistreated his daughter and neglected her education and upbringing.

An early lesson of sexual repression occured with Woman Downtown's first menstrual period which happened without warning or understanding. She had the sense she was "afflicted with some unique disease that couldn't be mentioned" and isolated herself in a locked room. Her strange behavior resulted in her institutionalization in a private school for "disturbed children" (50). She was released to the care of her godfather and guardian, Judge Collister, whose wife explained the "curse" to her, but her sense of having a "shaming disease" lingered, the isolated "nights of the ranch were rooted in [her] too deep, they had made [her] strange" (51). Woman Downtown's concept of her awakening sexuality as a disease has a profound effect on her psyche of which she is highly conscious: "something in me was wrong, invisibly but

incurably twisted by those desolate nights, the wolf-howling and the woman's cries of ecstasy which I thought were--anguish" (52). Her mingling of the image of the howls of wolves and ranch dogs with the Apache cries of her father's mistress during intercourse leads to her confusion of sex with torture, pain and savagery.

Her position as a State Senator's daughter requires her to make a debut in society where she assumes the "beautiful mask" and "icy smile" of the archetypal young southern lady. Her wild untamed nature submerges beneath a ladylike pretension as she is "acclaimed the most popular debutante of the season" while the parties seem to her like "state funerals," increasing her sense of isolation and the deadening sensation of being frozen on blocks of ice (RD 52). She plays the role of lady to perfection which makes her ideally suited for a loveless marriage to the death-dealing tycoon of the Battery Empire. Sex in her marriage is a lifeless, mechanical affair. Obligated to use obscene language to arouse her impotent husband, her view of sex as harmful and destructive is again reinforced. Wedded to the Battery Empire president, she plays hostess to "monsters" visiting her husband's prison-like estate where she presents a "beautifully trained front" with a "lifelike face" whose smile "looks almost real" (52-53). Beneath the mask she is one of the "walking dead" fitted to host the inhuman guests who "trusted her with their attache

cases with the payola and the secrets in code and why not? Wasn't [she] perfectly NOT human, too?" (25)

This feeling of being "NOT human" expresses her self-loathing at being unable to reconcile her ladylike exterior with untamed bestial tendencies buried in her sexual nature. Both Blanche and Woman Downtown share a sexual ambivalence which is portrayed in their alternation between roles as ladies and whores. This basic duality in their characters creates tension between their self-images as both lady and whore and public images imposed on them by other characters in the plays. They both resist and invite the dominant view of the patriarchal social worlds of the plays which characterize them as insane and promiscuous femmes fatales.

Anca Vlasopolos views Blanche's victimization as a result of her refusal to "become the woman in the traveling salesman joke, the stereotype of the nymphomaniacal upper-class girl" (333). Stanley's response to Blanche's astrological sign of Virgo the Virgin is a contemptuous, disbelieving "Hah!" and from this point in Scene 5 of Streetcar Blanche's onstage behavior becomes increasingly unladylike. She begins using streetwalker slang when confessing to Stella her need to marry Mitch. As her attractiveness is "fading now" she doesn't "know how much longer [she] can turn the trick" (SND 79). She expresses her fear Mitch will "lose interest quickly" because men "think a girl over thirty ought to--the vulgar term is--put out...And I'm not putting out" (81). Before this scene

ends Blanche attempts to seduce a newsboy whom she asks to "kiss softly and sweetly on the mouth" (84). As she is expecting Mitch she sends the boy away with the regret that "it would be nice to keep you, but I've got to keep my hands off children" (84). The scene ends ironically with Mitch's arrival with a bunch of roses and Blanche's archly romantic greeting of him as her "Rosenkavalier" (84).

Blanche's allusion to the opera Der Rosenkavalier provides an ironic parallel to her dilemma. Hugo von Hofmannstahl's and Ricard Strauss' opera involves an aging, married Marchioness in 18th century Vienna who has an illicit affair with a boy half her age, the Count Octavian (the Rosenkavalier) whom she must renounce to a younger bride while looking forward grimly to a loveless old age. Blanche's allusion to this highly sentimental romance reveals her disturbed awareness of the illicit nature of her desire for the newsboy whom it would "be nice to keep" if she didn't "have to keep her hands off children" (84). The allusion also comically inflates her courtship with Mitch as she casts him in the role of innocent "dumb angel-puss" (118) while she is the sexual sophisticate who, in her "experience with men", has "had a good deal of all sorts" (106).

Blanche subverts her projected image as a lady with that of the whore in much of her dialogue with Mitch. For example, she informs him she tries "so hard to be gay" because the "lady must entertain the gentleman--or no dice" (85,86). Her

attempt to create a romantic atmosphere on her date with Mitch by lighting a candle in the dark apartment so they can "pretend [they're] sitting in a little artists' cafe on the Left Bank in Paris" (88) betrays the extent of Blanche's idea of being "very Bohemian" (88). She sharply undercuts the romance by a performance in French which Mitch cannot understand as he does not know the language. She says: "Je suis la Dame aux Camellias [sic]! Vous etes Armand! Understand French?" When Mitch replies that he does not, she continues: "Voulez-vous couchez avec moi ce soir? Vous ne comprenez pas? Ah, quelle dommage--I mean it's a damned good thing" (88). Blanche has just asked Mitch to go to bed with her and remarks what a pity it is he doesn't understand before humorously concluding "it's a damned good thing" he does not.

Her self-identification with the Lady of the Camellias is the reverse side of the coin of her Rosenkavalier romance. The Lady of the Camellias is the archetypal nineteenth century prostitute with a heart of gold who renounces her younger, inexperienced lover, Armand, to a life of bourgeois respectability. The prostitute, Marguerite, from Alexandre Dumas' 1852 play, is however portrayed as a "wronged and exploited woman who suffers from the double standard which society casually applies to sexual misdemeanours of the male (Cruikshank 76). This self-image Blanche projects offers a direct analogue to her own situation. By identifying Blanche with Marguerite, Williams displays both her acquiescence to



the role of whore and the double standard of a society which condemns Blanche's sexual misconduct as unclean while sanctioning the aggression and sexual assault of the rapist, Stanley.

When Blanche's past is discovered, Stanley is not about to let his friend, Mitch, "jump in a tank with a school of sharks" (104). Mitch repeats Stanley's remark that Blanche is a "wild-cat" and declares she is "not clean enough to bring in the house with [his] mother", but he still wants from her "what [he's] been missing all summer" (119). This dehumanization of Blanche as an animal continues with Stanley's idea of her as a "tiger" who "wants some rough-house" (130) which leads to his conclusion that she "wouldn't be bad to--intefere with" (129).

Vlasopolos's article about the "gender-determined" basis of Blanche's victimization finds that the "troubling focus" of Blanche's rape is that the "act becomes public and the woman is punished" (333). Stanley's reduction of Blanche to the promiscuous "whore ... who provokes and enjoys another encounter" makes his sexual transgression appear "more easily forgiven than the female's desire" (337). Despite Blanche's fight against the image of whore attributed to her, the sexual double standard of male prerogative and female repression in sexual relations is as operative in Streetcar as in Dumas' play and Strauss' opera.



When Blanche's honest accusation of Stanley is denied by Stella and Mitch, despite their suspicions of Stanley's guilt, Blanche is considered insane. Because she is telling the truth, Williams interestingly turns the issue of Blanche's madness into a reflection on the insanity of a social order based on Stanley's "animal force" (69). Early in the play Blanche condemns Stanley's drunken violence toward his pregnant wife as "lunacy, absolute lunacy" (SND 57) while the Kowalski's milieu dismissed this view because Stella and Stanley were "crazy about each other" (61). Blanche later tells Stella she thinks she's "married to a madman" (64). The degree to which Stanley's crazed behavior is tolerated, condoned and excused is appalling to Blanche. In the same way Stanley reduces Blanche to the figure of a maniacal nymphomaniac, Blanche perceives Stanley as an insane animal.

She finds his "bestial" conduct "sub-human" and "ape-like"; Stanley is a "survivor of the stone age" whose poker night is a "party of apes" (72). Her plea to Stella not to "hang back with the brutes" indicts not just Mr. Kowalski but his entire world, the urban jungle where Blanche is both "not wanted" and where she's "ashamed to be" (70). Even the landlady, Eunice, echoes this indictment when she rebukes the poker players as "callous things with no feelings...making pigs of [themselves]" (131). But Eunice also urges Stella to reject Blanche's plea not to hang back with the brutes because "No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going" (133).

Stella characterized her husband as "the only one of his crowd that's likely to get anywhere" (50) and Stanley echoes this confidence when he exults in his "luck" (131) in the final scene of the play: "to hold front position in this rat-race you've got to believe you're lucky" (131). Streetcar leaves the "rat-race" (131) clearly in the "big, capable hands" (43) of Stanley Kowalski whose luck is his animal force endorsed by the social group who outlaws Blanche's desires and despises her aspirations.

Williams' substitution of the "rat-race" for Blanche's visionary hope for the human race does not negate Blanche's transcendence of the Kowalski's world in the play's final scene. Tainted with the corruption of Stanley's lie which Bert Cardullo points out is "greater than any Blanche ever told," the Kowalskis' world "does not come out the victor in any contest with Blanche" (92). Their lack of compassion, forgiveness and true understanding dooms the Kowalskis as well as Blanche, whose transcendent vision of humanity is at least a "postive force on the spiritual level. It is a creation of an ideal illusion in the face of a destructive reality" (Roderick 101).

Woman Downtown also exhibits the lady/whore duality which characterizes Blanche's internal struggle between matter and spirit, but she reverses Blanche's role-playing. Blanche maintains a ladylike exterior while Woman Downtown displays a "volatile personality" in public where she appears "loud,

boisterous and vulgar" (Mann 143). She dresses provocatively and behaves in a drunk and disorderly fashion, inviting the attention of unsavory characters in the bar of the Dallas hotel where she temporarily resides. Red Devil opens with a scene in which a character named Hooker rolls a drunk at the bar while the hotel manager tries to remove her from the premises. This scene parallels one of the "lurid reflections" in Streetcar when a transparent stage wall reveals a "prostitute [who] has rolled a drunkard. He pursues her along the walk, overtakes her and there is a struggle" (SND 128). This vision represents the ugliness of the future "mapped out" (105) for Blanche by Stanley which she evades by retreating into madness. The same future is predicted for Woman Downtown by her lover, King, who repeatedly warns her against her bestial nature.

The opening scene with the Hooker brings up an issue central to Woman Downtown's character. She is mistaken for a prostitute by Drunk in the first scene and by Red Devil conventioners in a later scene. She flings sexual insults at these men, challenging their virility with taunts of impotence, inviting public hostility to the "tongue in her mouth runnin' outa control" (7). This remark evokes not only the lewd suggestion of a foul mouth, but also hints at her knowledge of the Battery empire's secrets and her willingness to reveal them. Her assumed name is as ambiguous as her dubious respectability. Meant to conceal her true identity as

the wife of the president of the Battery empire, the name Woman Downtown carries the unmistakable association of an urban prostitute whose anonymity is the hallmark of her profession.

When Drunk tosses his hotel room key at Woman Downtown, her reaction is strangely self-revelatory: "Hands off!--I don't want that, I never did want that, all that I ever wanted was--." Her speech is interrupted by King's entrance into her life. King obviously is meant to be what Woman Downtown wanted: a rescuing knight rather than a mere sexual partner.

Still, in her relationship with King, Woman Downtown continues to struggle against the barbarity in herself as well as that in the external world of the play. King's sense of personal dignity and Latin male pride resist her sexual aggression; he repeatedly warns her of a degraded future if she does not control her frenzied sexuality: "You drink in bed for experience and you'll wind up not a lady with some bad words in her head and some habits that don't fit a lady like screaming and clawing in bed" (32). He calls her a "wild cat" as Mitch calls Blanche when he discovers her shady past but Woman Downtown asserts her own title as "She-wolf" (32), born of lonely nights on an isolated West Texas ranch.

The struggle for Woman Downtown to make contact with something "human" (32) in her life is an effort to regain her lost humanity, characterized by a need to become a lady again in order to gain King's respect and love. She strives for

release from the bestiality of her "she-wolf" nature bred in her by her brutalized upbringing and marriage. She believes her alliance with King will save her from the self-destructive she-wolf inside her.

She is aware of an element of sexual abnormality or perversity in her nature which she traces to her isolated childhood deprived of any natural affection and an abusive marriage with her tycoon husband who could only achieve sexual satisfaction through her uttering obscenities. As she continues her bouts with drugs and liquor, King threatens to leave her with the warning that she will "wind up not young anymore, not beautiful, not elegant" (59). She responds, "Yes, yes, puta!" (59), finally uttering the word that men have always used to describe her: whore.

King blames her bestial tendencies on her association with her depraved husband's brutality, recognizing that "somehow beneath her brassy, anguished exterior is a loving, caring woman who now lives in a special hell of self-pity, self-destructive impulses and loneliness" (Mann 143). Ashamed of her she-wolf aggression, Woman Downtown confides to King that there are "moments, only moments. I turn to an animal" (59). Her attempt to recover her humanity is closely tied with her defiance of the "Battery empire's devil-face grinning" which confronts her in the red neon sign blinking outside her hotel window (57). Her decision to testify against the Battery empire before Congress may be only a

defiant "gesture" like the offensive "salute" King makes to the Battery sign outside the hotel, but for Woman Downtown her Congressional testimony "makes a sort of dignified monument to mark where I was, a woman without a name, inclined to wolf-howls at night" (59).

The name of Woman Downtown's perfume, Vol de Nuit, translates to "Night flight" (8) which is an objective correlative of her dream of escape from her dehumanized existence, her "wolf-howls" in the night. Her unresolved sexual tension betrays a sense of personal defilement and degradation. Her search for a protector in King, like Blanche's hope for rescue by Mitch, expresses their need for release from unsatisfied desires. Both heroines have exhausted and exploded what Vlasopolis calls the "myth of limitless sexual fulfillment" which attempts to "reshape for the future the uncontrollable decay and death of the past and fuse them with their opposite, desire" (334). Both characters seek a lasting relationship based on respect with Mitch and King. They long for a sense of permanence and protection from the realities of time and death. When Mitch refuses to marry Blanche because she's "not clean enough" (SND 121), she gives "him his walking papers" (126) because he has lost respect for her. In an early version of Red Devil Williams included a scene in which King's wife, Perla, working as a maid at the Yellow Rose Hotel, confronts Woman Downtown and calls her a whore. Perla proudly informs her husband's mistress that "she

came to her husband untouched" and Woman Downtown replies: "Virgo Intacta! Probably never touched by any man before or since he touched you. You may be right that he doesn't respect me but very wrong that he used me. I used him: as resurrection from death" (McHughes 232).

King's respect is very crucial to Woman Downtown's resurrection from death. At their first meeting, she fears her reclining in bed will be misinterpreted by King as "a provocation" and he replies he does not "take advantage of ladies" (RD 16). Woman Downtown constantly strives for the nominal title of lady from King who expresses his distaste for her unladylike behavior on several occasions. He tells her she lives like a "hotel hooker--no name, no past, no future" (47) and that she'll wind up "the kind that's picked up by any stranger and banged in alleys and back of trucks" (59). When she tries to persuade King to tell her where he is when he dying she promises him "tonight I won't say a word that isn't right for a lady to say" (85) and offers him two choices for her future: "My life began ... the night I first saw you ... and is going to end this one...I'll take you to the Yellow Rose or be--an unidentified--female body--mutilated past recognition back of a truck in an alley if you don't tell me where..." (85).

Their final exchange in the play resolves the issue of King's respect for her as he informs her: "I love--a lady." Woman Downtown responds, "King, do you respect me, now?" He



replies, "You? Respect? Yes! La verdad! Truth. I give you that name, now" (91). The nominal title of lady is finally bestowed upon Woman Downtown, yet within a few minutes of King's onstage death she becomes the consort of the gang leader, Wolf, and finally "utters the lost but defiant outcry of the she-wolf" (94).

Williams' stage directions inform us she is "demented with grief" (93) at the moment of her transformation from lady back to she-wolf. Like Blanche with the Doctor at the end of Streetcar, in her state of dementia she "offers no resistance" to the "supporting hold" of Wolf, whom she asks: "Yes, you. Take me. Away..." (93). Saying Yes to a future with Wolf and his gang is, for her, an affirmation. Threatened by an anonymous phone call which offered a choice between escape to another hemisphere with a new identity or death, Woman Downtown is "caught in a trap" (SND 128). Like Blanche without Mitch's protection, Woman Downtown without King is alone in a hostile world. Her attempts to escape the surveillance of her husband's thugs were futile before she met King and used his human contact to break out of her isolation. King del Rey showed her the compassion denied her by the rest of the world. He was the only person she encountered at the Yellow Rose who struck her "as a person [she] could appeal to for assistance" (RD 14). She was first drawn to King because she sensed her "intimacy with him will secure him as a confederate" (17), but



their alliance gave her strength to defy the force that wanted to silence her.

King represented a life-giving force opposed to the death-dealing Battery empire. He offered a liberation for Woman Downtown that was not merely sexual, but spiritual. She tells him once after lovemaking: "You know there's somewhere beyond, and that time I think we went there" (60). Woman Downtown agrees with King's view of his brain tumor as an arbitrary fate, a cosmic "accident" (30). For her, life and death are arbitrary, even accidental experiences, but love is an "act of God" (30). King's love, especially, is an affirmation that humanity survives in a desolate world populated with red devils. Her belief in love as an "act of God" parallels Blanche's view of salvation in a compassionate friendship between lost people in a chaotic universe expressed in her words to Mitch when he responds to her need for companionship: "Sometimes--there's God--so quickly!" (SND 90)

But there is irony in Woman Downtown's phrase "act of God" which, in insurance parlance, is a euphemism for arbitrary haphazard events beyond human control. The transcendent spirituality King offers Woman Downtown cannot rescue her from chaos. King dies after killing the Battery men's agent who attacked Woman Downtown, his final defiance of the arbitrary forces of destruction. Yet Woman Downtown is now lost and abandons her new-found humanity as she joins Wolf, the leader of a revolutionary street gang opposed to the

civilized brutality of the Battery empire. Her transformation from lady to she-wolf is effected abruptly and awkwardly but it represents a significant departure from the fate of Blanche DuBois.

In an interview with Cecil Brown, Williams said Blanche was a "metaphorical sacrificial victim of society ... yet she fights to the end. She's a tiger, extreme tigers are destroyed, not defeated" (299). This toughness is mirrored in *Woman Downtown* yet her private nightmare is subsumed in the public nightmare of Williams' cataclysmic ending to Red Devil. *Woman Downtown* must join the group opposing her enemy which is also portrayed as the enemy of humanity. As one lonely voice she cannot fight the conglomerate powers which threaten to silence her forever. She must abandon her articulate defiance, her Congressional testimony, for the primitive speech of the gang. Transformed into the matriarch of the "lost and defiant" who have been "failed or betrayed," like herself, by the dehumanized forces of the Battery empire, she becomes a she-wolf again. Williams' pessimism about the failure of the individual to fight the group is as evident in the ending of Red Devil as in that of Streetcar but, unlike Blanche, Williams' tiger is not destroyed this time.

Blanche's plea to Stella not to hang back with the brutes is answered grimly by *Woman Downtown*'s return to barbarism as a desperate recourse in an inhuman world. Williams' stage directions indicate his belief that *Woman Downtown* remains

lost in the emerging chaos. As a she-wolf, perhaps she will remain "always alert like a hunted thing in the woods, preparing to run, run--with a pack at [her] heels" (RD 49). Yet her final outcry is that of the "lost but defiant" she-wolf (94) and it is her continued defiance which distinguishes her survival from Blanche's destruction. She refuses to be a sacrificial victim to the Battery empire's corruption in the same manner as Blanche was victimized by the corruption of Stanley Kowalksi's world. She does, however, sacrifice her humanity to a barbaric form of survival which appears to offer little hope of redemption for a fallen world.

## WILLIAMS' ORPHIC VISION

Many Williams' scholars such as Bigsby and Porter have identified Williams' major theme as the division between instinctual and spiritual being, the body/soul dilemma expressed in terms of a need for transcendence of earthly desire to a spiritual love of humanity. Williams' plays attempt to show sexual fulfillment can create this ability to love others while puritanism is portrayed as "a source of human impotence because it springs from the inability to love. The puritan is unable to express himself either spiritually or instinctively" (Spivey 127). A sharp division between puritanism and hedonism exists in Williams' work which has implications beyond the issues of human sexuality explored in the dual natures of Blanche and Woman Downtown in the previous chapter. Williams' Puritanism represented one aspect of cultural life in his Southern heritage from which he longed to escape without sacrificing its spiritual values.

Williams recognized the tension between instinctual and spiritual life in his culture and, especially, his native culture of the South. His early career focused upon what appeared to be the death throes of Southern culture as represented by the psychic rending of female protagonists such

as Blanche in Streetcar and Alma Winemiller in Summer and Smoke. But as early as his first produced Broadway play, Battle of Angels, Williams was forging a myth of cultural renewal along with his portrait of a dying South.

Val Xavier, the itinerant artist/musician of Battle of Angels and its revised version, Orpheus Descending, is Williams' archetypal Orphic figure. Val, as his surname indicates, is intended as a secular savior of a society sunk in brutality and bestialism. Val, short for Valentine, also represents the god of love whose sensuality transcends the carnality of physical love into a redemptive, spiritual love. This figure embodies Williams' mythic vision of the union of body and soul, a symbol of cultural renewal and hope in a modern world of fragmented human beings requiring a savior to reconcile the division between the instinctual and spiritual life within both the self and the culture.

Williams' mythic heroes, often artist figures such as Val Xavier in Orpheus Descending and King del Rey in Red Devil, are torn apart and destroyed, like the mythical Orpheus, by barbaric forces, but their destruction in mythical terms represents a cycle of death and rebirth, emphasizing renewal of life even among the ruins of the past. Orpheus Descending provides an early instance of Williams' use of the pre-Christian myth of Orpheus as a structural framework for a play in which a dying culture can be portrayed as one in which new forces struggling to be born cause destruction and despair.

According to Hugh Dickinson's analysis in Myth on the Modern Stage, Williams' two versions of the Orpheus tale, Battle of Angels and Orpheus Descending, "represent--at least on the conscious level--[Williams'] most personal identification with a Greek myth" (280). Williams was drawn to the myth of Orpheus by three of its major aspects: the poet as enemy of society, an ambivalence towards the attractions and dangers of love, and the nature of death (283). Val Xavier is the poet-musician perceived as outsider and enemy in the barren Two River County whose ironic name belies the sterility and deadly oppression suffered by the inhabitants of this fallen Eden. Val is ambivalent about his attraction to Lady, wife of the "conventional symbol of death", Jabe Torrance, who is dying of cancer and, like Pluto, wants to bring his wife into the underworld with him. Lady's marriage to Jabe has been a loveless business arrangement which has trapped her in a deathlike existence. She is the Eurydice to Val's Orpheus.

Val reawakens Lady to life through his potent sexuality and she becomes pregnant. His decision to stay with Lady when he learns of her pregnancy, despite the threats made against his life by the barren community, redeems him from a past lived in corruption which made him skeptical of the ties of love. Val finds love more important than his freedom even at the risk of death at the hands of the mob in Two River County.

Dickinson finds Williams' mythic vision reaches for multi-layered significance. The literal level presents a love

affair which ends in the death of the lovers at the hands of a repressive brutal society. The allegorical level contains elements of several myths, examined also by Nancy Baker Traubitz, chief among which is the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. The archetypal action of this myth is used to represent the "awakening to life through sexuality" (292). The moral level portrays the "struggle of the rebellious, free individual against the ties and prejudices of the community" but, finally, Dickinson finds the plays' "action dramatizes the biological antithesis of life and death" (292) inviting an anagogical meaning, or spiritual significance. The darkness enveloping the hell of Two River County leads to Val's destruction and Lady's death, but Val's snakeskin jacket is left to Carol Cutrere, Two River County's outcast reformer. The snakeskin legacy is a "symbol of resurrection, for to the pagan world the snake was not only a religious and sexual sign, but also its shedding of its skin was held as figure of renewal" (293).

Nancy Traubitz' analysis of myth as the basis for dramatic structure in Orpheus Descending agrees with Dickinson that Williams use of the myth emphasizes the "responsibility which love places upon the poet/singer Orpheus and the pull toward life and fruitfulness that the Orpheus figure creates in those dead souls he meets in the hades" of Two River County (4). Traubitz separates the mythic patterns of the later version of Williams' play and, like Dickinson, finds Williams'

Christ symbolism a problematic superimposition upon Val's Orphic status. Dickinson finds no likeness between Val and Christ as savior and objects to Williams' figurative use of Christ in the crucifixion and resurrection of Val as inappropriate symbolic overkill. Traubitz views Val's Christlike attributions positioned in the play in scenes alternating between Val's Orpheus role with Lady/Eurydice and his Jesus role with the visionary folk painter, Vee Talbot. The repressed sexual desire underlying Vee's scenes with Val juxtaposed with the Orphic scenes with Lady Torrance demonstrate, for Traubitz, the "descent into darkness, the pull of human physical love and the primacy of the Orpheus legend over the Christ analogue" (8).

Traubitz disagrees with Dickinson's conclusion about the regenerative symbol of Val's snakeskin jacket left to the outcast rebel, Carol Cutrere, at the end of the play. Traubitz questions "how willingly and deliberately" Val sacrifices his life for love of Lady. The snakeskin symbol of renewal "carries overtones of both the serpent's bite which sent Eurydice to hades, and the snake disguise assumed by Satan in the Garden of Eden. Val thus becomes a fallen angel" (9). Traubitz views the incompleteness of Val's Orphic quest as a denial of the hero's return found in cyclical heroic myth as Val fails to rise from his descent, except in the transfer of the snakeskin jacket to Carol Cutrere, whose "exit from the



hell of the store is perhaps as close as Williams can come to assent and affirmation" (9).

Both critics agree that the overriding concern of Williams' Orphic vision is with the antithetical relation between life and death embodying both the creative and destructive urges of mankind. Yet the survival of a free spirit among the ruins such as Carol Cutrere in Orpheus Descending and Woman Downtown in Red Devil offers a mild affirmation of human endurance if not transcendence. Their survival suggests the cyclical nature of the Orphic myth though Williams does not dramatize the myth's phase of rebirth. C.W. Bigsby recognizes that the strength of Williams' Orphic figures is in their fight against death (98). Death is an implacable force in Orpheus Descending, personified in the corrupt and life-destroying residents of Two River County where the "dominant images are death and disease, while an apocalyptic fire constantly threatens" (97). Yet Bigsby charges Williams with mystifying the "relationship between personal and public corruption" by neglecting the play's social dimension in favor of the "momentary passion, the brief glimpse of grace" instead of the "transformation of the public world and the private spirit which [Williams] had once looked for" (95). He finds Orpheus Descending "recasts the South as hell" (98) in which violence, racism and intolerance corrupt all personal and social relations.

Two River County is a "hermetic world trapped within its own myths and historically condemned by its own sexual and spiritual impotence" (97). Williams introduces Val Xavier's vitality into this sealed environment which fears and annihilates any signs of life within its borders and offers him as sacrificial victim to the dismembering furies.

These critics find Williams' Orphic vision is not always sustained in his plays which employ the Orpheus motif as the omnipresence of death is not often mitigated by a promise of rebirth. Beate Hein Bennett finds Williams' use of the Orpheus motif "belongs to a whole symbolic tradition in the quest myth which Northrop Frye calls the dying-god myth where heroic action is dissipated into confusion" (446). Frye's application of myth to literary structure recognizes that works displaying surface realism employ mythical plot patterns and archetypal imagery derived from elements of nature such as divine, human, animal, vegetable, mineral, fire, water which are themselves divided into apocalyptic and demonic forms, contrasting visions of heaven and hell (Frye 139,141).

Frye relates the apocalyptic vision to Revelation, the attainment of paradise associated with archetypal images of the city as temple of living organic spirit (144). A crucial element of apocalyptic symbolism associated with the city/temple in paradaisic imagery is fire, emblematic of "communication between the divine and human worlds" associated

with burnt sacrifice, the smoke and incense of the altar and ritual purification of the soul (145).

Demonic symbolism is the opposite of apocalyptic in its emphasis on man's remoteness from the divine order in which the unity of the human and divine is symbolized by the Eucharist. Demonic symbolism employs cannibalistic imagery or the "tearing apart of the sacrificial body" found in the myths of Osiris and Orpheus (148) and represents a universe of "nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion" (147).

Frye's enumeration of demonic imagery bears an uncanny resemblance to Williams' imagery in Red Devil. The natural world presented as inorganic, associated with wild, desert spaces, recalls Williams' image of the wasteland. Animal life is "portrayed in terms of monsters or beasts of prey" (149), the Wolf as the natural enemy of the paradisaic lamb, emphasized by Frye, is a powerful symbol of human bestiality employed in Williams' play.

Distorted images of labor such as "engines of torture, weapons of war, armor, and images of a dead mechanism which, because it does not humanize nature, is unnatural as well as inhuman" characterize Williams' symbol of the Red Devil Battery Corporation from its inception in The Project from The Knightly Quest to its incarnation in the universal malevolence and destructive aggression in the play. Also important are Frye's "cities of destruction ... great ruins of pride"

associated with elemental fire appearing in the "form of ... such burning cities as Sodom" (150). Williams' set descriptions of the Dallas skyline with its sinister red glow "turning from gold to flame to ash" as well as the explosions and sounds of battle in the mise-en-scene create the atmosphere of a city of destruction.

Also closely related to Williams' Orphic vision is Frye's discussion of the "demonic erotic relation" which is a "fierce destructive passion ... generally symbolized by a harlot, witch, siren, or other tantalizing female" (149). The demonic image of the Woman Downtown as a harlot recurs throughout the play. She is mistaken for a whore by the Battery Men in the bar of the Yellow Rose and approached as such by several men in the play. Despite King's admiration for her ferocity and wildness, he is repulsed by her animalistic sexual aggression. He repeatedly reproaches her and warns her about sexual addiction in the same way he disapproves of her alcohol dependence.

Many correspondences exist between characters and events in Red Devil and elements of the dying god myth elaborated by Frye in his Anatomy of Criticism which suggest Williams' use of the Orphic model in structuring the action of his play. Frye's distinguishes four major aspects of the quest-myth: agon, or conflict between forces of life and death; pathos, or death of the hero or monster or both; the disappearance of the hero; and the reappearance and recognition of the hero (Frye

192). The Orpheus story is a dying god myth in which the disappearance of the hero "takes the form of sparagmos, or tearing to pieces" and the "hero's body is distributed around the natural world" in expectation of final phase of reincarnation which will bring redemption.

The Orphic presence is strong in The Red Devil Battery Sign. King del Rey is Williams' last Orphic hero, whose death is portrayed in stages of decline heightened by bursts of defiance. King opposes the Battery empire whose rise to power is a result of the failure of American society to achieve what Spivey terms "true community", the calm resolution of the rapaciousness of uncontrolled desire and the "cold impotence caused by puritanism ... destroying the cultures of the world" (132).

This true community is the gift of the Orphic figure who can reconcile cultural division by his example of devotion to love, but society rejects reconciliation in an orgy of selfish desire or aggressive impotence. The Battery empire is another instance of the "southern bosses" of Williams' plays, who "manipulate large numbers of people and try to overpower Orhpean individuals who are attempting to bring love back into people's lives" (Spivey 134). King del Rey defies the Battery empire by rescuing the Woman Downtown from its dehumanizing influence and revitalizing her spirit through love.

King's Orphic nature is revealed by the competition and jealousy of his wife and daughter. King's wife, Perla, and

daughter, La Nina, display a bitter enmity toward each other that only disgusts King, who likens their fighting over him to "two cats" (RD 75). La Nina realizes the impotence of their battle, which destroys the love they seek when she tells Perla "I think it's too late to fight over what's left of him" (75). The women's clawing over King's shattered body and fragmented mind and King's disgust with their bestial wrangling over him suggest the frenzied Maenads who dismember Orpheus in their rage at his rejection of them due to his refusal to stop mourning the loss of his dead wife, Eurydice (Evans 219-20).

King's repeated warnings against mindless sensuality to the Woman Downtown emphasize the Orphic message of transcendence of selfish desire in selfless love. A speech from Williams' 1973 draft of Red Devil stresses King's gift of love to the Woman Downtown who asks herself how he entered her heart and questions the significance of his death:

He -- did -- enter, through a revolving door to the Yellow Rose Hotel where we--lived for a while. And there's a responsibility, now, to justify his concern. Dying, he made me live (Mann 152).

The revolving door to the hellish hotel suggests Orpheus' descent into the underworld to bring Eurydice back to life. Orpheus was willing to experience death to bring his wife back to life. For the Woman Downtown, King's death meant her own survival as the draft speech concludes: "Continuing with it [King's love], somehow, and so I endure...(Mann 152).

This epilogue from the first version of the play is remarkably different from Williams' revised ending, of course,

but it serves to clarify Williams idea of the significance of the love shared by King and the Woman Downtown. The destruction of the Orphic figure contains hope for rebirth, but ours is the age of what Spivey terms the "dismemberment of Orpheus. And in such a time women ... must arise to gather up the mythic hero's scattered parts and to prepare for a new age of heroism by preserving elements of culture" (134). In Greek myth the female Muses preserve heroic culture by restoring the wholeness of Orpheus whose resurrection completes the myth of cyclical death and rebirth. In the first ending, Woman Downtown recognizes her responsibility to preserve the Orphic love which transcends the madness of power and desire and offers hope for renewal in picking up the scattered pieces of King's legacy to her.

Another aspect of renewal is childbirth. In the play's final version, Williams offers the hope of spiritual renewal in the understanding reached by King and McCabe about Nina's unborn child. The cycle of rebirth and renewal promised by the Orphic myth is voiced in McCabe's faith that when "the child of a man bears the child of a man... the life of him is continued" (79). Although King will die, his dream for his child to stand "higher than the new sign on the new skyscraper," his dream for her "glory" (79), his dream of stardom, which represents hope for individual freedom and achievement opposed to a deathly animal existence will continue in the life yet to be born.



Like Streetcar and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, two earlier Williams' plays featuring an unborn or newborn child motif, the resolution of the conflict between brutality and sensitivity forces an apparent compromise solution in unrealized existence, the unknown life of the future. Both of these plays end with actual or promised birth of children, instances of life continuing but not necessarily progressing to a higher stage of evolution as evidenced by Blanche's warning to Stella not to hang back with the brutes. Maggie the Cat's triumphant life-lie about her pregnancy ends on an unsatisfactorily ambiguous note. The problem ending of Cat is well-known and well-documented, even by the author himself, who published his original version of the play's ending along with the ending demanded by the play's Broadway director, Elia Kazan. Williams felt that "the moral paralysis of Brick was a root thing in his tragedy", a tragedy belied by his unwarranted embrace of the "Pollits' world of human barter" and capitulation to the deceitful mendacity of life which Maggie's triumph in the Broadway ending endorsed (Bigsby 92).

Both Streetcar and Cat end with new life beginning, but neither births are presented as anything greater than the will to live, to go on, as Stella and Maggie must, despite the lies they must tell themselves and others in order to continue. The endings of these plays are not merely compromises, but are also desperate struggles to survive among the ruins of the past in an untried, unknown future. The promise of renewal



offered by McCabe's and Nina's unborn child is explicitly stated in McCabe's promise to King: "She will deliver the child and she will go back to what she was made for, by you" (RD 80). McCabe promises not mere survival, but the continuation of King's dream of transcendence, his triumph over death viewed in terms of La Nina's vitality, the life force opposed to the deathlike existence imposed on the world by the Battery men.

The play's startling ending seems to overshadow this promise of renewal in La Nina's transcendence of bestial existence, but Williams establishes a link between La Nina and the Woman Downtown which ties their fate together. In Act One, Scene Three, King tells Woman Downtown he recognizes something in her that is "wild like flamenco. You got something in you like my kid in Chicago--a heart on fire!" (33). King's passion for his daughter's vitality, his admiration for her stellar qualities such as her singing and dancing like a "gypsy fireball" (28) is really his passion for life made all the more intense by the nearness of death. He recognizes his fierce determination to revive himself in the Woman Downtown's struggle against the deathlike grip of the Battery Empire which had made her one of the "walking dead" (53). When the Woman Downtown is apotheosized by Wolf into a Madonna of the future at the end of the play, her association with La Nina is complete. Both women have the "heart on fire" of the untamed beast and both are endowed with procreative

powers, La Nina by her pregnancy and Woman Downtown by Wolf's addressing her as the "Mother of All" (93).

But the legacy of King's love, its urging of a spiritual transcendence of the animal nature of man, seems to be denied by the stark ending of the play which places the bright future of La Nina and her child in doubt. La Nina is last observed as McCabe restrains her from following her father on his journey toward death. This final scene with King's family stresses the importance of the safety of Nina's baby over King's personal welfare. McCabe prevents Nina from following her father, who has broken through the yard fence, and Perla "collapses to her knees, clinging to the fence posts"(82). None of them follows King, whose crashing through the fence is an act of defiance and liberation in the face of death.

King goes forward to his fate with McCabe's "pledge" to make Nina "go back to what she was made for" (80) and La Nina "rushes toward the fence," but is restrained by McCabe who urges her to "stay here, be calm, think just of our child in your body; for King and for me, keep it safe in you ... safe" (82). The stage visual of the broken fence suggests the cyclical nature of death and rebirth when La Nina attempts to follow the dying King through the opening he has made but is prevented from crossing over the barrier in order to preserve the life she's carrying.

If Williams had ended the play with this scene, we would have an ending with a more positive and explicitly stated

promise of renewal in the future than the ambiguous endings of Streetcar and Cat offer. Yet even disregarding the implications of the actual ending of Red Devil, the grim image of McCabe and Nina amid the violence of the Wasteland in their last scene does not assure a brighter future for them and their child. Williams dark vision does not permit so easy a victory over death. The "hell-hollering death grin" (25) of the Red Devil Battery sign remains towering over the cityscape of downtown Dallas amid the explosions and clashes of the gangs in the Hollow.

Bennett's formerly stated assertion that in the Orpheus myth the hero's action is "dissipated into confusion" (446) takes into account only one phase of mythic action, the sparagmos. This stage of the myth gives "the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world" (Frye 192). In the Orpheus story, this is the action of the hero's dismemberment which causes a collapse into chaos. This action provides the subtext of Williams' play in which the musician King represents the poet-musician Orpheus and his redemptive power of love. Williams does not extend the action of his play into the next phase of the dying god myth which is the revitilization of a moribund world or what Frye calls the "recognition of a newborn society" (192).

Williams ends Red Devil Battery Sign, not with a redemptive vision, but with an image of confusion and anarchy

inherent in the dismemberment phase of the Orpheus myth. Following King's death all hell literally breaks loose onstage. Violent street gangs, led by Wolf, a "boy-man" who dominates these "warring factions", appear to "explode from a dream--and the scene with them" (92).

Williams' stage directions for this final scene betray his awareness of the problematic ending of his play, noted by reviewers of the three productions performed during Williams' lifetime. At this point in the drama, Williams directs that the play "stylistically makes its final break with realism. This break must be accomplished as if predetermined in the mise en scene from the beginning, as if naturally led up to, startlingly but credibly" (92). The playwright expects the break with realism to be shocking but credible with proper staging employing production values extraneous to the text which sufficiently prepare the audience for this break.

Williams' textual preparation for this "final" break with realism may be demonstrated by stage directions for setting and sound effects and dialogue references to the threat posed by the "denizens of the Hollow" to the status quo (92), revealing the playwright's care to make his break with realism credible and not entirely dependent upon production values, a method which would weaken the play considerably. But Williams' anxiety about the ending of his play betrays more than a concern for stylistic change.

Williams difficulty with the play's ending is documented by Bennett who reports that a Vienna reviewer of an Austrian production in January 1976 ridiculed the New York producers of Red Devil for their efforts to have Williams retract the play's "phantasmagoric" ending, retained in the Vienna and London productions (Bennett 435). Producers closed the show in Boston in 1975, a city which also prematurely closed Battle of Angels thirty-five years earlier (Gussow 39). Battle of Angels was Williams' first play employing the Orpheus myth, later revised and performed in 1957 under the new title, Orpheus Descending.

Bennett views the "phantasmagoria" of Williams' play as "interwoven into the gangster and love plot" throughout, leading credibly to the climax in which the "nameless lady reconciles and unites the young people who take her as their Madonna while they cry out for a holocaust" (436). Bennett locates Williams' use of the Orpheus myth in earlier plays such as Orpheus Descending within Frye's tradition of the dying-god myth "where heroic action is dissipated into confusion" (446). Red Devil dramatizes precisely this dissipation of heroic action at a mythical level underlying the literal presentation of King's journey toward death. The death of the hero gives rise to questions of resurrection or redemption for the culture or society which destroys the hero and itself in its present state of existence.

Williams rejected the ambiguous symbol of renewal he employed in the childbirth endings for Streetcar and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, as his continuation of the play beyond the scene of McCabe and Nina's retreat for the safety of their unborn child indicates. The future, for McCabe and Nina, is their child's resurrection of King's spirit and a promised revitalization of La Nina's "heart on fire" (RD 33).

But Williams' follows King's death with the sudden release of chaotic forces, the "warring factions" of the Wasteland whose explosions provide a "warning glow" as they finally stand "motionless" and stare at the audience. This frozen tableau of menacing primitives, pierced briefly by the "lost but defiant outcry of the she-wolf" before a "second explosion and a greater, whiter flare" exposes "more desolation" (94), is the culmination of the play's infernal vision.

Bennett identifies infernalism as a crucial part of the redemptive vision in modern literature and asserts that the inferno motif blended in the Orhpic vision of modern European dramatists, such as Cocteau, Anouilh, Sartre and Ionesco, is employed in the service of cultural renewal and reflects "the particular ordeal of a society's reordering" in postwar Europe. Bennett also shrewdly points out similar "metaphysical needs of the South" to "reconstruct while seeking new principles" (446), inspiring Williams to adapt the myth in his own work. But the mythos of cultural rebirth cannot be



accomplished without experience of the inferno, or ritual death. Mythical archetypes are used to seek universal concepts of mankind to overcome the sense of alientation and separation from history in the modern age and to achieve a "cyclical vision of history and experience" (434) which relates the present to the past.

But, as Bennett warns, the inferno comes first. Important components of the infernal vision are "a sense of confinement and of the ineluctable repetitiousness of torture", a sense resulting from "metaphysical speculation about death, be it spiritual, emotional, or physical, namely a fear of absolute stasis" (436). The infernal vision is present in Red Devil as well as many Williams' plays, but is especially characteristic of the playwright's late style. Bruce Joe Mann finds Williams late plays reflect personal as well as artistic concerns with aging, death, disease, isolation and loneliness (276).

These are major subjects of all Williams' plays, but the inescapability of death, isolation and loneliness and a desperate struggle for meaning in the face of death characterize Williams' later works and mark his return in Red Devil to the Orphic model employed in Orpheus Descending. Williams' biographer, Donald Spoto, identifies fear as the central emotion of Red Devil Battery Sign, fear of being "followed, drugged, beaten, overheard, confined" (311). These fears reflect Hein's aspects of infernalism associated with



the mythical quest of the dying god myth. The fear of absolute stasis, or death, induces a sense of entrapment, what Bennett terms the "paradox of motion within immobility, of the longing for fertile growth within dearth and aridity" (441).

A sense of entrapment pervades the condensed personal hell of Williams' drama. The Woman Downtown has been confined in a mental hospital and later in a Dallas hotel suite. She is under constant surveillance by the Battery Men as King is watched by his wife, Perla. Their inferno is a downtown hotel where their awareness of confinement, King in his marriage and disease and Woman Downtown in her desperate predicament, is mitigated briefly by their contact with each other and their dreams of escape.

The inferno setting in modern drama is often a purgatorial place in transit such as hotel lobbies or waiting rooms offering a single exit, but outside the place of confinement is an unknown territory that is "not absolute freedom but merely another potential prison" (Hein 439). The hotel lounge in Red Devil where King and Woman Downtown have repeated encounters without advancing beyond their initial confinement is just as purgatorial an environment as that of Sartre's No Exit .

The revolving door of the hotel lounge is emphasized in the epilogue of Williams' first version of the play finished in August 1973. Woman Downtown accepts the "responsibility to make King's concern for her a worthwhile act" (Mann 152),

acknowledging that he "entered [her] heart ... through a revolving door to The Yellow Rose where [they] lived for a while" (151). The epilogue and speech are missing from the final version of Red Devil due to Williams' radical change in the ending for his play. The revolving door is retained as a stage visual in the final version representing the exit for the metaphysical confinement of the Woman Downtown.

King's first entrance into the Woman Downtown's hell is through "the revolving door of the 'club' lounge" (RD 7) and the same door is an illusory exit through which she passes twice in the course of the play. In the first scene she "rushes dizzily toward the exit and stumbles" (10) and "rushes wildly back in" when she discovers the monster cab driver waiting to take her to yet another place of imprisonment. This is her first false exit indicating the ineluctability of her fate.

Her second exit from the hotel lounge occurs in the second scene of Act Three in which she frantically attempts to persuade the Barman to trace King's phone call. The barman fails to trace the call and directs her to an exit leading to an alley where she is brutally attacked by the Drummer. This second false exit leads her from the alley, the dead end King warned her against and she predicts for herself, "an unidentified female body mutilated past recognition back of a truck in an alley" (85) toward the site of King's death.

She escapes from the Drummer in the alley by clawing him with the animal's instinct for survival which suggests her eventual transformation into the she-wolf at the end of the play. But her final interlude with King stresses her human dignity. King tells her she is "a lady" he both respects and loves (91). Up to this point, the Woman Downtown's apotheosis from an animal existence to to the life of a human being is complete. The original version of the play added an epilogue in which she defies the Battery Sign and affirms her spirit of endurance in a monstrous world (Mann 152) but in Williams final ending she hangs back with the brutes in the primitive power struggle threatened by Wolf's gang members staring motionless at the audience. Her escape attempts end in regression to the animal existence she was fleeing in her relationship with King. Williams implies some hope for regeneration in her alliance with the brutish force opposed to the Battery Empire, but the death of King results in her sinking from the hard-won status of "Lady" (91) back to "Woman. Down. Town" (93) when she becomes the consort of Wolf.

Williams does not permit his unidentified heroine to elude her "final fate" as the "lost but defiant she-wolf" (93-94). Her interludes with King are a temporary refuge from the monstrosity of the infernal world they inhabit. Penthouse B is their hideaway in which they can lock the doors and pull the shade against the glare of the Red Devil Battery Sign which intrudes upon their privacy. King doubts what the

outcome of their relationship will be. He tells her "I don't know how we're going to work this out but some way will--with locked doors, God, magic--anyhow for a while" (54). Both King and Woman Downtown dream of escape from their confinement. King dreams of recovery from his illness and the promise of rejuvenation which he believes is offered by resumption of his singing career with his daughter. The Woman Downtown deludes herself with the idea of her Washington trip which she admits is "maybe just a gesture, and maybe--fatal" (59). Neither of them really has faith in the other's dream because they recognize the illusory nature of escape from their private hells.

King tries to dissuade Woman Downtown from her Washington trip because she's risking her life. He tells her to let the Judge go in her place because the Judge is old, she still has a life ahead of her. King's sense of his approaching death gives him an awareness of human limitation and the limits time places on all of us. He believes the Woman Downtown's defiance of the Battery Empire is not as important as her survival, her freedom to live out the rest of her life.

But the Woman Downtown resists King's awareness of time's limits. She insists time places no limits on lovers while King insists the opposite: "There is no limit to time--but for us, there's a limit, a short one" (48). She later misquotes him when he tries to persuade her to abandon her idea of testifying before Congress: "Once you said, 'Time has no limit

for us'" (57). Following King's relapse, Woman Downtown attempts to keep him alive long enough to bring him back to her suite at the hotel by affirming "there's always more time than you think" (84). Faced with King's attempt at suicide to avoid the final confinement of a hospital where they would operate and perhaps leave him "an imbecile" (85), Woman Downtown cries "We knew it was coming! Our last time but not here" (90). Her desperate plan for King and herself to end their lives together in a new "room with no Red Devil grinning through the window" at the Yellow Rose Hotel fails (85). Woman Downtown endures their "last time" together at the Crestview Pharmacy. Here King, interrupted in his suicide attempt by the intrusion of the Drummer paid to follow them by the Battery Men, kills the Drummer instead.

King's final action can be interpreted as his last rescue attempt for the Woman Downtown, but neither "locked doors, God, or magic" (54) offer escape from the inferno of the Battery Empire. Woman Downtown abandons her idea of political resistance and joins the anarchic forces let loose after King's death.

Since God, magic and locked doors offer no protection from the assaults of the Battery Empire emblematic of a violent crumbling universe, Williams' characters experience a metaphysical crisis enacted in patterns of confinement and failed escape attempts. To fulfill this pattern of infernal vision, the modern artist must find solace in either dream or

nightmare, taking "brief respites in temporary states of oblivion or some provisory phantasmagoria of apotheosis" (Bennett 437). In Red Devil Williams' Orphic vision portrays a dying culture in the grip of a rising barbarism. King and Woman Downtown belong with the "fugitives and feigned madmen" caught in this inferno vision, reflecting the "strong human desire to escape the sense of the ineluctable" (Bennett 440).

Woman Downtown is frequently referred to as "mental" (10); she has been a mental patient in a mental hospital, but Williams views this as a method of confinement which attempts to brainwash nonconformists and dissenters. King is humored by his musician friends and his family when his brain tumor causes him to drift off into reverie, but they all disregard the vital regenerative power of his dreams. King tells Woman Downtown that dreams are necessary, especially in the face of death.

When he was hospitalized a terminal patient said to King that "death is not big enough to hold life and life is not big enough to hold death" (RD 73), but King denies this balanced view of a symmetrical relationship between life and death when his time has come: "Life is--too big for death? [He shakes his head with a savage grin] No! Al contrario" (90). The contrary proposition, death is too big for life, characterizes the inferno vision, the "longing for redemption and the realization of the futility of that hope," the dream of escape and transcendence which cannot "happen in actuality" and is

"performed in a form of phatasmagoria, thus leading to the realization that any form of escape can be effected only by the power of imaginative will" (Bennett 440).

The infernal vision portrays the very human struggle against the ineluctable forces of death and decay, both personal and societal. In the context of the dying god myth, infernalism is only one phase in a regenerative cycle. This phase of the myth involves the "universal principle of matter striving to dissolve into spirit, into meaningful nothingness" (451). Hein explains the "juxtaposition of specific classical myths with modern times" as a "metaphoric expression of the critical point in a culture's development when old values must be shed to give as yet unformed forces free flow and recognition" (451).

These unformed forces are presented by Williams as the "denizens of the Hollow" opposed to the present social order symbolized by the corrupt Battery Empire which they will destroy. Williams characterizes these unformed forces as "warring factions" without a leader. This is consistent with a vision of anarchy and chaos following the dismemberment of Orpheus within the mythic structure of the play.

Williams does, however, present Wolf as "powerful and pre-eminent" among the warring factions. Wolf, unfortunately characterized by stage directions rather than stage action which would reveal this aspect of his character to an audience, has "a sense of command and intelligence that isn't



morally nihilistic" (92). Wolf's integrity might be established in performance by a bit of onstage action in which he prevents the robbery of the drugstore owner who has thrown himself over his cash box (93), but the critical point is Williams' concept of Wolf as "not morally nihilistic" (92). Wolf's protection of the store owner and the Woman Downtown bear the burden of conveying to an audience Wolf's and Williams' opposition to the moral nihilism of the Battery Empire.

But the apotheosis of Woman Downtown into the "Mother of all" and "Sister of Wolf" (93-94) delivers the final blow to a corrupt and evil civilization by symbolizing the shattering of the incest taboo. For the Woman Downtown to embody the roles of sister and mother involves the breaking of familial bonds which are the basis of all social structure as the dissolving of familial relationships "equals a regression into presocial, anarchic communion" (Bennett 449). Thus the final line and action of the play is the naming of the unidentified Woman Downtown as "Sister of Wolf", an act which bursts the seams of civilization and seals its doom.

Williams' anxiety about the ending of Red Devil is evident in his stage directions about the break in realism and his concern with a correct interpretation of Wolf's character. Williams' fears about a nihilistic interpretation of the ending are voiced in his description of Wolf. Critics and



audiences have, however, almost uniformly viewed the play's ending as nihilistic.

Sy Kahn, writing about the Vienna production in 1976, said European critics found the "apocalyptic conclusion too unlikely a consequence of [the play's] realistic plot and playing style", the logical, sequential storyline suffering from a "Gotterdammerung conclusion" which is "too intellectual an imposition" (363). Kahn notes that Viennese critics viewed the play as representing "old men's desperate and despairing answers to a violent world" (367). Audiences and critics rejected the transformation of Woman Downtown from a "a harried, frustrated and frightened victim to almost a deified vision" as "too long and abrupt and evolutionary leap" (368). Most critics rejected her apotheosis as a "secular goddess-mother who will lead... a bedevilled, fallen humanity" (368) yet Kahn accepts the visionary nature of her transformation into a "dark goddess in strange alliances to combat [the] menace" of the "slick power conspiracies" (369).

Kahn recognizes the play's movement away from realism toward "dream and vision" with the "symbolic statement of its meaning" being "a projected consequence of Williams' reading of contemporary society" (368) but he fails to define Williams' reading beyond a statement of the playwright's habitual "paranoic and pessimistic view of the world" expressing Williams' "feelings of oppression, alienation and inevitable defeat, particularly for the injured underdogs of

the world" (369). Kahn finds "considerable power" (370) in the bedroom scenes between King and Woman Downtown and the shift from realism to a "visionary and ambiguous conclusion" troubles Kahn less than Williams' European critics though Williams lies open to the charge of "oversimplification" in his "reading of society" (371).

Victoria Radin, reviewing the 1977 London production, found the problem ending of the play beyond Williams' talent, as the "thunder and smoke" of the final scenes "howl out Williams's own shriek of authorial impotence" (26). Radin concurs with Kahn that the bedroom scenes contain Williams' best work in the script: "As long as we're in the pink satin hotel bedroom Williams has us in his power." Radin finds Red Devil is "basically a small play about an affair between a woman on the way up and man on the way down" (26). Charles Marowitz, reviewing the same London production, also found the play inflated with a political "frame of reference which does not legitimise [Williams'] political commentary." Marowitz feels Williams is "telling one story (the one he's really concerned about, impetuous promiscuity in an exotic Texan setting) and only making reference to the political parallel in order to give that tale a greater significance" (27).

Radin's view of Woman Downtown as a "woman on the way up" and Marowitz's notion that Williams' major concern is merely with "impetuous promiscuity" reveal only facetious and facile approaches to the play. These reviewers' comments evaluate

Red Devil as political statement derived from an uneven mixture of sexual and power politics within an unpersuasive framework. Kahn's difficulty with the play's ending is more carefully considered and enlightening. Kahn recognized critics and reviewers troubles with Red Devil as a difficulty reconciling "its realistic and its visionary, expressionistic elements" (364) without resorting to merely political interpretation of the plot.

Kahn understands the play's movement from realism toward phantasmagoria as an attempt to "fashion an answerable myth to the world of inexorable power" (367). Kahn perceives Williams' ending as an "expressionistic and emblematic representation of a desperate alternative to a power-crazed and dehumanized world" (364). The play's visionary elements indicate to Kahn the presence of poetic mythmaking which carries greater significance than mere political statement, but Kahn half-heartedly agrees with the rest of the play's critics that Williams' vision of "revolutionaries led by a too swiftly metamorphosed matriarch" is "too unlikely to square with reality" (371), as though what is arguably "reality" were the ultimate test of poetic vision.

Beate Hein Bennett offers insight into the mythmaking process of artists which remains the same throughout history: "the poet or mythmaker is visionary and alchemist distilling and combining from the real phenomena the undercurrents of energy for which he has no name but for which he can create

analogous metaphors" (451). Williams created the Battery Empire as an image of a corrupt power elite opposed by the dispossessed inhabitants of the Williams' Wasteland, including marginalized romantics such as King del Rey and the Woman Downtown.

The conflict of these forces is observed from life, or "real phenomena," and transmuted through the vision of the artist into "analogous metaphors" which appear onstage, for example, in the image of the angry revolutionaries at the conclusion of Red Devil. The interpretation of Williams' art as political statement substitutes a factitious relationship between art and reality which leads to a rejection of the visionary impact of the play.

If one accepts the mythical subtext of this play as the dismemberment phase of the dying god myth found in the tale of Orpheus representing chaos in the wake of cultural collapse, then dissatisfaction with the darkness of Williams' vision and the savagery of the play's ending is not difficult to understand. Williams' play does not portray the regenerative promise of human redemption found in later phases of the myth because his play is grounded in the confusion, despair and destructiveness attendant upon the death throes of a culture.

The inferno vision is least palatable to bourgeois audiences such as those of Western Europe and the United States which reject its image of order achieved through chaos because a cyclical view of human history with its recurring

pattern of cultural collapse and renewal dangerously threatens the status quo. According to Bennett, the "mainstream of post- Enlightenment thinking (most middle class thinking)" abhors an "affirmative confrontation with an inherent chaos and destructive urge in the human condition" (447).

Williams' lifelong fascination with the creative and destructive urge present in the Orpheus motif has been traced from his early play, Battle of Angels, through its revision in Orpheus Descending, with its significant working title of The Dismembering Furies (Bigsby 95) to the phantasmagoric vision presented in The Red Devil Battery Sign. The itinerant musician, Val Xavier, is portrayed in the earlier plays as an exemplar of healthy sexuality promising physical and spiritual love to a community of women with repressed desires and men with perverted envy and hatred of his procreative powers. Yet Val Xavier proves just as vulnerable to destruction as the mothlike Blanche in Streetcar as their "gift is to be drawn towards the very flame which will destroy them" (Bigsby 40). King Del Rey, like Williams' earlier Orphic figures, fights the social corruption and the implacable force of death in this late play, representing one of Williams' last sacrificial victims to the dismembering furies.

## CONCLUSION

In The Knightly Quest, A Streetcar Named Desire and The Red Devil Battery Sign, Williams forged a vision of the destructive power and malignancy of the materialist proponents of a mechanistic and dehumanizing social order responsible for what Williams saw as the "destruction in America" of what he characterized as "the ideal of beauty" (Jennings 248). This ideal is expressed by Williams as the "knightly quest, a thing of the highest significance in every part of creation, wherever a man in the prison of his body can remember his spirit" (KQ 454). Williams' protagonists oppose and seek to transcend the brute force of animal instinct menacing the survival of a tender, compassionate and humane way of life.

Williams' use of the fallen belle figure in Streetcar and Red Devil forms a composite portrait of the individual's struggle to pursue the knightly quest of the spirit while combatting the duality of the human animal both internally and in external forces emerging in an era of social change. The fallen belle is not merely a psychological portrait of the displaced and dispossessed outsider in an unfeeling universe. She is emblematic of a fallen world; her decline and fall point to weaknesses and faults in the new social order which

victimize her and aim at her destruction. Williams' sensitive heroines attempt to flee an encroaching barbarism but their escape routes are cut off. Blanche's attempts to cable Shep Huntleigh to rescue her from her fate and Woman Downtown's "calls" for outside help "are not completed" (RD 4). Blanche's message for her Western Union cable applies equally to Woman Downtown: "In desperate, desperate circumstances! Help me! Caught in a trap" (SND 128).

The Southern experience of defeat and decadence as portrayed in the desperate circumstances of Blanche and Woman Downtown provides an analogue to widespread corruption and decay in social values and morality in Williams' vision of the modern world. His is a "Spenglerian vision", according to C.W. Bigsby, which equates the "fall of the South" with the "fall of culture":

The South that Williams pictures is either disintegrating, its moral foundations having been disturbed, or being taken over by the alienated products of modern capitalism. On the one hand are the rich, cancerous, their economic power signalled... through sexual impotence as in Orpheus Descending...on the other hand are the new, brutal proletariat, as in A Streetcar named Desire, who begin by destroying a South become decadent and end, in The Red Devil Battery Sign, by destroying even themselves (45).

Williams' vision is Spenglerian only in its depiction of the chaos attendant upon social upheaval. The brutality and insensitivity of what Bigsby calls the "proletariat" can be read as ultimately self-destructive in the dehumanized and mechanistic world Williams projects onstage but his vision



cannot be viewed as despairing if among the anarchy and destruction are visible signs of redemption.

Bigsby charges Williams with a "growing apocalypticism" (124) in his later career as a playwright in which Williams vision of American society was one of "brutalism untempered by conscience, the total destruction of a sensibility untuned to the fierce pragmatics of the moment" (113). Bigsby finds unrelieved despair in this dark vision, "born, perhaps, out of personal and national crisis, but transposed onto a metaphysical plane" in which "romantic despair gives way to cynicism and a simplistic account of human decline" (113).

Red Devil Battery Sign is vulnerable to the charge of cynicism and apocalypticism if one ignores the playwright's efforts to transcend the darkness of his vision of spiritual decay in American life. In Red Devil Williams attempts to merge the metaphysical plane discerned by Bigsby with the social and psychological reality of his characters. The problematic nature of this uneasy mixture of styles is evident in his use of the Orpheus myth as an underlying dramatic structure for a play whose allegorical content is concealed beneath a surface realism. This surface realism of the drama is broken throughout the play by Williams' employment of scenic and sound effects and the use of music. The sensuous ranchero rhythms of the mariachi band counterbalance the explosions in the Wasteland, a combination of music and violence which evokes the basic elements of the Orpheus myth.



The music of King's men represents the achievement of man's creative spirit as King's account of the history of mariachi music indicates: "... in those days they played at marriages so they got them the French word mariages mispronounced to mariachis" (RD 28). The association of mariachis with marriage suggests King's status as an Orphic figure who reconciles the soul's division from the body by resurrecting the human spirit, effecting a marriage between the warring elements in man's nature. A natural harmony effected by the marriage of matter and spirit is not achieved in Red Devil. King's and Woman Downtown's love and respect for each other come close to wedding these two contraries of human nature, but the disorder created by the violent resistance of the Wasteland gangs to the Battery empire leaves chaos and anarchy in the wake of the Orphic hero's death.

This anarchy is apparent in the presence of Williams' Wasteland gangs, mentioned throughout the play and evident from offstage explosions. Despite their last-minute emergence as a counterforce to the Battery empire, Williams avoids characterizing their rebellion as organized resistance. The gangs are described as "kids" who are "outlaws in appearance and dress" (RD 92). Wolf "stands out" as "the dominant one" but "not as leader with such warring factions" (92). Woman Downtown's alliance with Wolf strengthens her defiant posture against the Battery empire. Her "final fate" (93) as Wolf's consort appears to be more than the mere "gesture" (59) her

Congressional testimony would have been. Her new alliance poses a more dangerous threat to the status quo as she joins the dispossessed and downtrodden in violent rebellion against those "who have failed or betrayed them" (94). This ending presents Williams' fiercest assault on the "society which had so wounded him" (Vidal xxii) and reveals his steely resistance to the brutal power which dooms his many crippled and anguished heroes and heroines.

The failure of Williams' cataclysmic ending in The Red Devil Battery Sign with audiences and critics provides an example of the disappointed expectations of contemporary theater audiences analysed by Thomas Porter in his study Myth in Modern American Drama. Porter's study of Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee concludes with a discussion of the critical and commercial failure of these writers' later works with American audiences. Porter's thesis is that American drama cannot provide a "community of belief" (248) or the integration of communal beliefs found in traditional, stable societies which have produced great drama. The fault lies in the fragmented nature of modern American society and a cultural attitude which insists that the writer "be a myth-maker whose mission is to create belief" (249).

Porter's views on contemporary American audience expectations of ritual fulfillment and resolution of polarities of belief existing in a fragmented culture parallel Bennett's view of the resistance of bourgeois audiences to

elements of infernalism in the vision of modern playwrights. Porter argues that behind the disillusionment of contemporary audiences with modern drama "lies the assumption that the playwright can create meaning where none is evident, that out of the chaos of a fragemented culture he can bring an ordered cosmos" (250). Bennett finds that audiences cannot face the image of disorder inherent in the infernal vision because it exposes the carefully composed bourgeois social order as a fictive structure both artificially supported and vulnerable to attack.

What is lacking in the vision of American playwrights yet required by their audience is, according to Porter, an "acceptable regeneration symbol" which reconciles the "polarities of belief and experience" present in the playwrights' serious treatment of cultural problems in dramas which conclude not with regeneration, but with "isolation and despair" (250-51). While understanding audience expectations of cultural reconciliation evidenced by the desire for symbols of regeneration, Porter rejects the social imperative for playwrights to "transcend their culture":

They are not Messiahs and their plays do not contain a gospel for Americans. What they show us are the forms and pressures of the times, but without fulfilling the ritual expectation that would resolve those forms and pressures into an ordered vision (250).

Williams' use of Orphic myth in Red Devil denies the ritual fulfillment inherent in the complete phase of the myth which Williams does not dramatize. King's death is the final

result of a mental and physical decline which progresses steadily throughout the play. King's dream of spiritual transcendence of death and decay is continually diminished as the play marches toward its chaotic conclusion. In a similar retrograde fashion, King's house, separated from the "miniature silhouette" of the "towers of Downtown Dallas" by a Wasteland inhabited by brutes, has "drawn in upon itself for protection from the menacing profile of the city" (34).

In the third act, the menacing city becomes an overt symbol of death and degeneration. Williams' set description recalls the epigraph Williams appended to his final version of the play published in volume 8 of The Theatre of Tennessee Williams. The epigraph is taken from Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge," the opening poem of Crane's American epic cycle, The Bridge which presents Crane's symbol of spiritual transcendence in the Age of the Machine (Wolf 28). Williams quotes only one line from Crane's poem as a motto for The Red Devil Battery Sign: "The City's fiery parcels all undone" (Williams Theatre 281). Jack C. Wolf, in his study of Orphism in Crane's The Bridge analyzes these lines from "To Brooklyn Bridge" on the literal and metaphorical level. Literally, the lines refer "to the effect of sunset on the window panes" of the skyscrapers of Manhattan "or on the buildings themselves"

while (within the context of other lines from the poem not quoted here) the metaphorical statement is

that technology, in stressing the material advances, has separated itself from vision (though not in visionary structures such as the Brooklyn Bridge) with a resulting decline in religious feeling. This in turn is leading to the decline or death of the society which is so oriented because ... the material world is hopeless without vision--the "snow" of winter or death of vision has already brought about the concomitant failure of the technological society (28)

Wolf's recognition of the tone of despair in this passage from Crane's poem, its suggestion of the "cessation of vitality and energy, even of submergence and death" (28) clarifies Williams' choice of these lines as a motto for his play about American spiritual decline and moral decay. The set description of the "City's fiery parcels" appears in Act Three yet provides a lurid atmosphere for the entire play:

we see the city in profile, many windows of tall buildings are catching the light of sunset; they are like myriad candles and they change color ... turning from gold to flame and to ashes of flame and , finally, to dark, with here and there a point of electric light or a touch of neon. On top of the highest tower is the only neon sign which is now visible. It is the Red Devil Battery Sign (61).

This sign atop the towers of downtown Dallas is emblematic of the hellish nightmare of a world in which the Red Devil Battery Company is elevated to the status of an omnipotent power, the god of Mammon. The windows of the tall buildings are the city's fiery parcels and their transformation from "gold to flame to ashes of flame" and then to "dark" reflect the city's own undoing of itself in its blind worship of

materialism. King's dream of transcendence defies the ironic height of the Red Devil Battery sign. His dream of stardom for himself and his daughter represents the victory of something "wild like flamenco", the "heart on fire" whose life-giving spirituality resists the deathlike power of the dehumanized Red Devil Battery world:

This girl I made and gave to the world, she what could have stood higher than the new sign on the new skyscraper, tallest in Corona, one you see nights miles away. That!--that--height--for her was my dream" (RD 79)

Beyond his dream of artistic success, stardom represents King's urge to live and his longing to escape his diminished life as his wife's "invalid dependent" (31) in "Crestview-by-the-Dump Heap" (38). King dreams of pursuing his own knightly quest to "hit the road again" (38) with King's Men and La Nina. He recalls the harmony of "her voice and [his] together" and the magic of their transcendent duets is recreated onstage in a ghostly rendition of a their love song (38). King compares La Nina to the constellation Corona whose light is visible "nights miles away" (79). The incarnation of his daughter as the aureole of light displayed by the Southern Crown constellation suggests the spiritual light- and life-giving source of King's vision.

King's Orphic status is most apparent in his dreams of spiritual transcendence and his defiance of death. He defies death in many ways: his rescue and defense of Woman Downtown from the Battery Men, his faith in his dream of transcendence

for himself and La Nina and his hope for the future of her unborn child promised by McCabe. But Williams does not dramatize renewal or rebirth in Red Devil Battery Sign; instead he dramatizes King's death and ensuing chaos and disorder. Williams' vision of contraries, the conflict and opposition between life and death, matter and spirit, suggest the Orphic basis of his thought. Williams' use of the motto from Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge" emphasizes the failure and betrayal of a materialistic progress which denies the spiritual nature of mankind. Like Crane's "idea of death as part of the initiatory rite of rebirth in a cyclic belief" (Wolf 7), Williams confrontation with the forces of human decline and death in Red Devil Battery Sign attempts to achieve a balance of the polarities of matter and spirit. King's defiance of death resists the human limitation inherent in the "meaningless accidents" of "birth and death" (RD 30) while King's love for Woman Downtown is "not an accident" but "an Act of God" (30). The love shared by King and Woman Downtown is a spiritual experience with rich significance for them in an otherwise meaningless existence. Williams presents their love as an affirmation of what it means to be human. King's refusal to undergo useless surgery and die in a hospital bed leads to his plan to commit suicide while he has some vitality left. He wants to die looking in the eyes of the lady he loves. King's rather romantic fatalism recalls



that of Blanche in Streetcar. Blanche envisions her death as follows:

I shall die of eating an unwashed grape one day out on the ocean. I will die--with my hand in the hand of some nice-looking ship's doctor... And I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard--at noon--in the blaze of summer--and into an ocean as blue as my first lover's eyes! (SND 136)

King's and Blanche's visions of death both end in the gaze of their lovers' eyes. It is a comforting and easeful death which Williams' protagonists desire. They wish for the comfort of the lover's gaze as a final affirmation in the face of death.

The strength of the affirmation of King's love is repeatedly avowed by Woman Downtown. She resists the reality of his decline until the very last but bravely faces King's death along with him. This final acceptance of death which King calls a "necessary finish" (89) is possible only through the knowledge of their love. Despite Woman Downtown's regression to her she-wolf nature following her lover's death, she earlier affirmed the redemptive power of King's love when she told him "no matter how I wind up in the future, still... I would have known you, I would have lain with a king on a king-size bed" (RD 32).

The redemptive power of love is the only sign of affirmation Williams offers in Red Devil. Love is not a "meaningless accident" like "birth and death" (30). King's love saves Woman Downtown from self destruction and spares her

for a different fate than the one she imagined for herself-- that of an "unidentified female body mutilated past recognition back of a truck in an alley" (85). Like Blanche's refusal to accept the future "mapped out for her" (SND 105) by Stanley Kowalski, *Woman Downtown* evades the death sentence imposed by the Battery empire. She remains alive to fight in the primitive struggle for domination among the forces of barbarism warring over a dead civilization. This bleak vision was expressed in a different form in an interview given at the time of the play's Boston production in 1975 in which Williams says he has a "positive view of the future. I think we're going to go through almost total destruction, but not quite. I think we'll stop just short of it" (Ruas 292). The Red Devil Battery Sign betrays little optimism but ends with the staring eyes of the brutes gazing out at the audience, "all standing motionless" (94), implying the audience's responsibility for halting their advance.

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